



THE MOST
NOTORIOUS
TALKER
RUNS THE WORLD'S
GREATEST CLAN

NOVEL
4

WRITTEN BY jaki
ILLUSTRATED BY fame



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NOEL STOLLEN

ZEKE FEINSTEIN

LEO EDIN

Here is where it happens...
The birth of a new hero!

MALEBOLGE THE CHAOTIC

EMPIREO, SOUL OF THE SAMURAI

BERNADETTA GOLDING





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KEYWORDS

VELNANT EMPIRE

An imperial nation governed by Emperor Felix III. National currency is the fil. Ten years ago, after the attack of the depth-9 Valiant, Cocytus the Silverfish, Velnant absorbed three devastated countries, thus expanding its territory. The imperial reign has weakened in recent years, and the empire's economic growth has stagnated. Relations with the neighboring Republic of Rodania have also gone sour, casting a shadow of political unrest over the empire.

AIRSHIP

The greatest feat of magically engineered civilization, airships are capable of flight by way of special engines crafted with beast materials. The use of airships is permitted only among royals, nobles, and the regalia. The cost of using high-level flying beasts required for the engines is so great that airships are entirely beyond the reach of ordinary Seekers.

THE HOLY CROSS CHURCH

As the Velnant Empire's largest religious organization, the Holy Cross Church counts more than half of the nation's citizenry among its faithful. This includes a great number of Seekers, some of whom are part of Mistletoe, the Pope's own personal military organization. Mistletoe's duty is to spread the power of the church to other nations through displays of military might.

THE MOST
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Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE MOST NOTORIOUS “TALKER”
RUNS THE WORLD’S GREATEST CLAN



Pandemonium

Third-tier clan in the regalia. Though its members are powerful, it earned its position largely due to Leo’s exceptional abilities.



Leo Edin

(War God)

Pandemonium’s clan master and EX-Rank Seeker. Many consider him the strongest in the empire.

Supreme Dragon

The strongest clan in the empire, and the First Star of the regalia.



Zeke Feinstein

(Master Swordsman)

Vice-master of Supreme Dragon. One of only three people in the imperial capital to have reached Rank EX.

Sumika Clare (Sword Specialist)

Pandemonium’s vice-master. One of the last survivors of the avian race known as the Karura.

Victor Krauser (???)

Master of Supreme Dragon. Achieved Rank EX and is known as The Beginning One.

Cave of the Universe

Second-tier clan of the regalia. Largely made up of foreigners.

Wiseman (???)

Clan master of Cave of the Universe. A foreigner hailing from the eastern lands of Kou.

Sharon Valentine (Gunner)

Third in line in Supreme Dragon. A true warrior who trained Zeke.

Goat Dinner

Third-tier clan of the regalia. Currently investigating the secretive Netherworld Faith.

Dolly Gardner (Archangel)

Clan master of Goat Dinner. Previously approached Noel about a deal to assassinate Johann.

Kahn

Second-tier clan of the regalia. Composed entirely of members of the Kahn bloodline.

Mace Kahn (???)

Clan master of Kahn. A warrior who radiates calm detachment.

Valiant

A beast with an abyssal depth of 13, the strongest in history. Seeks to annihilate the entire human race.



Eighth World:
Malebolge the
Chaotic

Appeared in the imperial capital through means beyond reason. Plotting ways for the Seekers to be their own undoing.

Blade Flash

Third-tier clan of the regalia. The vast majority of its Seekers are Swordsmen.

Arthur McBain (Braver)

Clan master of Blade Flash. Current master of the McBain style of swordsmanship.

Golding Family

Approaches Noel about marriage and offers financial support.



Bernadetta
Golding

(???)

The sole daughter of the capital’s renowned Golding merchant family. Offered to Noel as a prospective marriage partner.

Ninth World:
Empireo, Soul of
the Samurai

Leader of the Valiants. Took the position upon the death of Cocytus.

characters



Wild Tempest

An up-and-coming clan and the talk of the empire. Founded only recently, the clan is already on the cusp of entering the regalia.



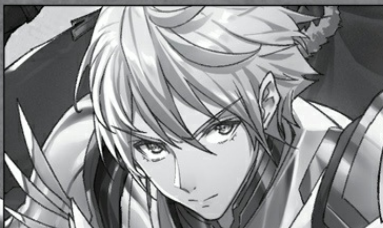
Alma Judikhali (Scout)

The descendant of a legendary assassin. Has an exceptional aptitude for combat.



Koga Tsukishima (Swordsman)

A former gladiator from the lands of the far east. A front-liner skilled with the blade.



Leon Fredric (Knight)

Former leader of the Winged Knights. Now vice-master of Wild Tempest.



Hugo Coppélia (Puppeteer)

An A-Rank adventurer and former death-row prisoner. Joined because of Noel.

Noel Stollen (Talker)

Clan master of Wild Tempest. Aiming to be the world's strongest Seeker, as per his grandfather's last wish.

Mirage Triad

A clan formed from the merging of Lightning Bite, Red Lotus, and King of Dukes.



Wolf Lehman (Warrior)

Master of Mirage Trident. Noel's friend and rival.



Lycia Mercedes (Archer)

One of the long-lived elves. Especially interested in Noel.



Vaclav Rosegund (Summoner)

Former member of the Winged Knights. A hulking, straightforward, and rational demi-human.

The Underworld

Organizations working in the shadows of the empire.



Finocchio Barzini (Criminal)

Head of the Barzini family and Noel's business partner.

Seekers Association

The organization that oversees all Seekers and clans.



Harold Jenkins (Gunner)

A Seeker Guild inspector and coordinator of Wild Tempest.

World Map

Imperial Territory

VELNANT EMPIRE

Former
Principality of
Archillio

● Imperial Capital: Etrai

Former Mediola Kingdom

● Turmeghid

Former
Free Cities,
the Mönch

● Port Town: Soldiran

Kou

Thunderhand
Island

Republic of Rodania

N

E



Prologue

SEVEN STARS GLIMMER like guardian angels above the Velnant Empire, a nation renowned for attracting the world's best Seekers. Those who rise to the very top—along with their clans—are awarded a tier on the regalia as one of the seven guardians.

This title, conferred by the emperor himself, is no mere decorative rank. It bestows tax exemptions on operational expenditure, permits possession of an airship—otherwise allowed only among the elite—and grants access to prohibited zones monitored by the Seekers Association. For these reasons, the regalia is seen as the most powerful rank a Seeker can achieve.

As the number of stars implies, the regalia is limited to seven tiers: Four third-tier clans, two second-tier clans, and the lone first-tier clan sitting at the peak. Until just recently, the seven clans of the regalia were as follows:

Third tier: Blade Flash, Goat Dinner, Pandemonium, Lorelai.

Second tier: Kahn and Cave of the Universe.

First tier: Supreme Dragon.

However, Lorelai was conquered by Wild Tempest, the clan belonging to yours truly: Noel Stollen. With Lorelai's clan master and vice-master both dead, the group was disbanded, opening up a spot on the regalia.

The position wouldn't be open for long, though. With the Valiant threat creeping ever closer, the regalia could not afford to go on with one less limb. A new clan had to be lifted into their ranks for the good of the empire—and soon.

Naturally, there was only one clan worthy of the position.

Everything was going exactly as I planned...

The imperial palace loomed over the Etrai's central district. It was a gigantic, eye-catching piece of architecture even in the sprawling imperial capital—a dignified, splendid fortress of a palace, home to the emperor and his family.

Its U-shaped facade greeted all those who entered the palace grounds. The left and right wings thrust out toward the city proper like giant arms, with an expanse of five hundred meters between them. Beautiful palace gardens replete with immaculately manicured seasonal flowers adorned the premises. These gardens were also home to facilities used for imperial affairs and matters of state.

It was in one of these buildings—a white chapel—that I currently found myself. The spacious, two-story construction was often used for imperial wedding celebrations. Its atrium ceiling boasted a grand artistic work of the heavens above. At the far end of the chapel was a golden altar and pipe organ. It was, to be honest, the very height of ostentatiousness. Under normal circumstances, I would have avoided it like the plague, but on a day like today, I didn't mind at all.

“So that's the snake,” came a whisper from someone in the audience.

Everyone's eyes were on me. The vibrant, noisy New Year's festivities had passed, and for the general public, life was returning to normal. Nevertheless, the empire's most distinguished had gathered here. There was the royal family led by Emperor Felix III, the most influential nobles in their various fields, the archbishop of the Holy Cross Church, and all the clan masters in the regalia decked out in military attire.

Blade Flash's clan master, Arthur McBain, wore dark, two-tone gold and silver armor and had two longswords strapped to his back. He gave the impression of being hard, serious, and grim. Arthur was in his mid-thirties, and his brown hair was cut short, highlighting his sharp gaze. He scanned the crowd the way a bird of prey might seek out a target.

Dolly Gardner, leader of Goat Dinner, was a crafty woman I'd met once before when she approached me about a combined effort to take on Johann and his clan, Lorelai. She was a porcelain beauty in her mid-twenties, though she looked much younger. Her lips and shoulder-length hair were bloodred. She wore a black, hooded leather dress and held a wooden cane in her hand.

Leo Edin, clan master of Pandemonium, was absent. The clan masters had come here today by request of the emperor himself, but Leo had the balls to

shun that invitation entirely. Every rumor about him was true. In his place was Pandemonium's vice-master, a young woman by the name of Sumika Clare.

Sumika had a dignified beauty, and her lustrous black hair ran to her hips. She was dressed light, with her shoulders and legs bared to the world, but it was the dark black wings that sprouted from her hips and head that attracted the eye. She was a Karura, an avian hybrid beast.

Karura were more human than beast, but their combat abilities were a cut above the rest. Unfortunately, their mating rates were low, and the species was on the cusp of extinction. They were considered extremely rare as a result.

Kahn's clan master, Mace Kahn, was a giant of a man with brown skin and white hair. Although he was already in his fifties, his body was a mass of powerful muscle. A scar ran along his chiseled face, and he was decked out in ferocious leather armor. He was human, and yet there was something wild and beastly about him. At the same time, the mischievous grin that peeked from his beard hinted that he was playful and easygoing. He carried a gigantic war hammer on his shoulder that could crush a man to dust. The weapon stood out when juxtaposed with his easygoing demeanor, and he seemed as if he might start whistling to pass the time.

The lone foreigner among the clan masters of the regalia was Wiseman, master of Cave of the Universe. He hailed from the far east, but unlike Koga, he came from the eastern continent of Kou. Even though he went by "Wiseman" in the empire, his real name was Yu Haoran. He was tall and slender with androgynous features, and he held himself with a supple, fluid femininity. He had the bluish-black hair characteristic of easterners, and it was tied together at the nape of his neck, where it ran down to his hips. He was dressed in the glittering eastern outfit known as the kimono. His face was the very picture of ease, and he held a foldable fan in one hand.

Then there was Victor Krauser, clan master of Supreme Dragon. Leader of the empire's strongest clan, he was a commanding man with a head of golden hair. He was much older than Mace and had to be nearing his sixties, but that wasn't at all apparent in his build, which showed no signs of weakness. There wasn't a hint of dull sluggishness in the way he stood in his pure-white armor, his sheathed dual blades acting like canes for his imposing posture. There was a

power in the golden eyes behind his glasses.

Aside from Leo, everyone had come to witness my moment in the spotlight. With Lorelai now disbanded, a new clan was taking its place among the regalia... and that clan was Wild Tempest.

We were rookies of a sort, and still few in number, but we had already punched well above our weight, such that our merits far exceeded many other, larger clans. We'd earned our spot on the regalia with brawn, money, and smarts.

"Noel Stollen," said the archbishop, acting as emcee. "Step forward."

The inside of the chapel felt not unlike a temple as the ordainment ceremony began—one that would officially recognize Wild Tempest as the regalia's newest member.

I walked toward Emperor Felix III, standing before the altar. He wore a knee-length justaucorps coat with a red cape. He was in his sixties now, and I saw a weariness in his eyes. His face was just as it looked upon the empire's gold coins. Surely he'd been a handsome man when he was younger; he had a slender face and sharp features, but many years of service and much anxiety had sped up his aging, and he now looked far older than he actually was. The wrinkles upon his face ran deep, and his hair and beard were streaked with white.

Pathetic, I thought.

It was my first time meeting the emperor directly. And though I had felt a certain excitement at the prospect of seeing the empire's ruler and the leading figure of the Dufort dynasty, in truth, I felt nothing but disappointed by the reality that confronted me.

Felix III was not an able or talented emperor. He had done nothing of any particular note in his time and had in fact been the cause of some costly economic failures. That said, in the history of the empire's rulers, he was not entirely worthless. At the very least, he managed to stave off complete financial ruin and epidemics—in essence keeping the boat of the Velnant Empire sailing along without sinking. With that in mind, and given that I too was running an organization, I'd felt a certain respect and sympathy for the man, but my

expectations had been misplaced.

The guy who stood before me was a wimp. He exuded no drive or ambition. I had to assume that all matters of office were now handled by his aides. He was little more than a puppet, living only thanks to the authority of the empire, and no better than livestock.

To think that I was expected to kneel before him! But kneel I did, with a deep internal sigh. It wasn't like I could go throwing tantrums at my own ordainment ceremony. Yes, it was humiliating, but it was within the scope of what I deemed acceptable. This was all just a formality, really.

"Noel Stollen," the emperor said with a husky voice. "You represent a new guardian star of our grand empire."

The archbishop, standing by his side, offered the emperor a thin sword for the ordainment. He took it in hand and spoke once more, tapping the sword on each of my shoulders.

"You are a guiding light for the weak. You will not lose yourself to your power, nor lose the righteous path upon which you walk. For as long as you shall live, you will do good and rid the world of evil. Declare it so."

Following the oath, I bowed my head. "I declare, on my own soul and the soul of my grandfather. I declare it to you, Your Majesty, Emperor of Velnant, and to the great creator god Emeth."

The emperor let out a low murmur of agreement before speaking once more. "The declaration is thus complete. As of this moment, your clan, Wild Tempest, is now appointed to the third tier of the regalia. With this rank, you become a national treasure. You are a light that will shine across our lands. Go forth, and do not forget the declaration you have made this day."

In other words: *Know your place*. I bowed my head again. The emperor lifted the sword from my shoulder and gave it back to the archbishop.

"Raise your head," he said. "You may stand."

I did as instructed and looked the emperor in the eyes. There was something almost self-deprecating in the smile on his face.

“I would like to hear of your ambitions now that you are among those who lead the regalia. Tell us how you will hold yourself, so as not to sully the name of the seven stars among which you now stand.”

If I were following tradition, this would be the point where I announced ambitions in line with my declaration. Basically, it was where I was supposed to bring the ordainment ceremony to its conclusion with a few pointless words—perhaps something along the lines of a poetic rewording of the declaration’s contents.

But I had no intention of doing any of that.

“If I may be so bold,” I said, “as a new member of the regalia, I would like to humbly suggest that we hold a gladiatorial tournament, open to every clan in the empire.”

The chapel plunged into silence, which was soon peppered with a few murmurs.

“What?” the emperor asked, confused. “A gladiatorial tournament, you say?”

I nodded, grinning. “Indeed, Your Majesty. The gladiatorial contest I propose is a grand festival to encourage and inspire the people of our great empire. With the Valiant fast approaching, our citizens are nearly overwhelmed by fear. That is why it is up to us, the members of the regalia and the empire’s Seekers, to show the people our power firsthand. In doing so, we wipe away the fear that binds them.”

Nobody said a word. They were all in shock. It was as if the imperial chapel were at the heart of a storm.

“A gladiatorial tournament?! For Seekers?! Why, that’s the most preposterous thing I’ve ever heard! You claim it’s in the name of inspiration, but when two Seekers battle, injury isn’t the only risk. Even healing skills can’t bring back the dead! Who will take the blame in the event of something so catastrophic?!”

The enraged protest came from one of the attending nobles, a high-ranking state lord—currently Minister of Justice, in fact—by the name of Count Lester Graham. Ever since the Hugo incident, he’d been my puppet. I knew his

weaknesses and controlled him from the shadows. It was I who had arranged for his promotion, after all.

“You speak the truth, Lord Graham,” I said, turning to him.

Ordinarily, at a ceremony such as this one, it would have been proper etiquette to call him by his full title: *Your Excellency, Minister of Justice Lord Lester Graham*. Not doing so was a clear act of irreverence, but I did it anyway. I wanted everyone to know that if they raised an objection, I was not about to wither before their rank or title. I didn’t care who they were, and it was for exactly this reason that I’d directed Lester to give his outburst.

My puppet lord shut his mouth, just as I had ordered him to beforehand, and nobody else spoke up afterward. None of them wanted to deal with a potentially aggressive reply. Lester was the first to get wrapped up in it, and they seemed to think it best to let him bear the brunt of my retort.

“Naturally, the last thing we want is for a competitor to be wounded badly enough to put them out of commission,” I continued. The murmurings of the crowd vanished as all in attendance awaited my next words with bated breath. They were in the palm of my hand now. “However, I have found a means with which to avoid this very pitfall. I will reveal the particulars in the coming days, and everyone here will be sent the relevant documentation. You can make sure of the details then—it is not my desire to get lost in overly long explanations today. Should you have any questions, you may contact me at any time.”

A small commotion rose in the crowd. I was not going to mince words. If they wanted more information, the documentation was what they’d get. But I was not going to get bogged down by questions. I was not going to be sidetracked here—my core goal was to impress upon these people that I had a strong reason for making my suggestion. Outside of the regalia’s clan masters, nobody in attendance knew the particulars of battle, so getting into a discussion about it was a waste of time—it might even make people unnecessarily suspicious. For those without in-depth knowledge, it was enough to know that proper paperwork existed.

“The tournament will be a great way to inspire the citizens of the empire, and it will prove to be a beneficial training exercise. To bring down the Valiant, the

cooperation of a number of powerful clans is essential. This competition, and the mock battles within, are a good opportunity to better understand one another's fighting styles." My smile grew as I spoke the next words. "And perhaps the tournament will also make clear exactly who among us is best suited to commanding our forces in the battle yet to come."

That instant, the eyes of the attending clan masters changed. The position of commander in the battle against the Valiant was still undecided. There was no doubt that the position belonged to one among the regalia, but there was not yet enough information to help decide *who*. My gladiatorial tournament would prove helpful even to those in the regalia.

"Your Majesty, I beg for your consideration. Allow me the opportunity to hold this tournament."

The emperor was confused until an aide ran up and whispered into his ear.

"Your ambitions have been heard," he declared. "A decision will be reached."

I bowed before the emperor. Based on the feel of the attendees, my plan had a fifty-fifty shot. More than enough. With a little work behind the scenes, it would become a reality.

Everything was going exactly as I planned...

Chapter 1:

The Blinding Light of the Untamable Snake

WITH THE ORDAINMENT CEREMONY OVER, next came the press conference and celebration. As the newest face of the regalia, we had to make an official announcement and raise public awareness. In any case, now that I'd done the work to get us access to the empire's biggest *seven-star* billboard, I was going to make the most of it. That meant taking every opportunity they gave me.

Before I had a chance to get into any of that, a voice called out to me on my way out of the palace.

"Wait. Snake—I mean, Noel Stollen. I want to talk to you."

I knew who the man was right away even though we were meeting for the first time. He shared the same handsome features as Emperor Felix III, but he was filled with a vigor and ambition that the old man lacked. His blond hair was like that of a thoroughbred's mane. Dressed in a showy justaucorps coat of his own, he exuded nobility and dignity. His name was Caius, and he was the second-eldest prince.

"Your Highness," I said with a bow. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance."

"People will see us here," the prince replied, motioning away from the palace entrance with his chin. "This way."

As soon as he finished, his guards appeared behind me. This wasn't an invitation; it was an order. Not that he needed to go to such lengths—I had zero intention of running.

I followed with a shrug, and we arrived at a parlor on the second floor facing the palace gardens. It was a spacious room used to receive guests and visitors, and the walls were filled with artwork. Inside, an old man I assumed to be Caius's butler was waiting.

"Sit," said the prince.

I did as ordered, and Caius sat on the sofa opposite me. His guard detail took up their positions around the room, eyeing me as they did so.

“First things first, take a look at this.”

Caius shot his butler a pointed look, and the man placed a thick sheaf of papers in front of me. I took them in hand, looked through them, and chuckled.

“Your Highness, whatever is the meaning of this?” I asked.

“That should be crystal clear. Those documents list the entirety of the damage and reparation payments expected of you. You need to pay up for what you did at the end of last year.”

The document’s many bullet points and associated values detailed the true price of the battle between me and Johann. Among them were the cost of reconstructing the town Johann had attacked, the damages thereof, and losses due to the railway construction delays. Caius wanted me to pay it all.

“As I recall, these reparations have already been paid in their entirety out of now-defunct Lorelai’s funds, no?”

Caius laughed and shook his head. “No. The government paid for that. Lorelai’s funds and property were requisitioned by the nation, meaning it was not Lorelai’s money but the government’s. The damages wrought were entirely the fault of yourself and Johann. It is only fair that both responsibility *and* reparations be split between the two of you. But with Johann dead, I am ordering that you pay the reparations in their entirety. I will have you pay the full amount—all 350 billion fil of it.”



Three hundred and fifty billion fil was a huge sum of money...and exactly the amount I had made by short selling the stocks of companies wrapped up in the railway project. I had invested the better part of that money in Vulcan Industries for a return of one percent annually—a decision set to earn me an estimated interest of fifty billion fil each year.

Caius intended to take that from me. But it wasn't money he was after, it was my economic standing. He wanted to weaken me so he could strap a collar around my neck.

I wasn't about to play ball. "Sincerest apologies, but I will not be paying any of this."

The prince's gaze grew a touch sharper. "Are you telling me that clan masters on the regalia can run away from their responsibilities?"

"Responsibilities? Let's get things straight." I took out a cigarette from my jacket pocket and lit it. "Oh, pardon me. I completely forgot to ask permission. Do you mind if I smoke, Your Highness?"

"Hmph. Do as you wish."

"Then I shall," I said, letting out a lungful of smoke. "Johann's attack was announced to the general public as the large-scale destructive efforts of an unknown military organization. In reality, that organization was Lorelai. Isn't it true that you were the one behind this cover-up, Your Highness?"

"Are you threatening me with an exposé? If so, it's pointless. Who do you think the public is going to believe? Certainly not you."

"Really? When it comes to lengthy, drawn-out battles, I'm at an advantage. You want to play a game of slander? I'm all for it. Shall we see who can hold out the longest?"

Caius wanted to hold me down by the neck and bring me under his control. There was no way he'd talk to me directly otherwise. He didn't want a mudslinging contest either. With the Valiant on the horizon, we didn't have the luxury to indulge in such trivial spats. He was an imperial prince, yes, but I knew two things: what he most wanted, and what he most wanted to avoid. There was ample room for negotiation.

The prince's brow furrowed. He could see I was not about to jump into his pocket. "Do you think you can?" he asked.

I sat back and grinned. "I do. It's gotten me this far."

"Do you have any idea who you're speaking to?!" The enraged cry came not from Caius but his butler. The prince's men drew their weapons. "You may be in the regalia, but you're just a commoner! What do you know of His Highness?! The likes of you could be executed in a mere second! Right here!"

"If you're going to do it, old man, then do it," I said with a glare. "What do I know? I know that you just decided to speak over the prince you so adore with your selfish little tantrum. And I know that you're tripping yourself up, Gramps. Do you actually think you're the prince now, or are you just going senile?"

"Y-y-you... You snake!"

"If you want to show your loyalty, then step back and shut up. I'm trying to have a conversation with the prince here."

The butler was so red with rage that he couldn't even speak.

"Enough," said Caius with a sigh. "The snake is right. You will refrain from speaking."

The butler's head drooped into a sad bow, and he stepped back. The prince's guards followed suit.

"You are everything they claim," said Caius. "Do you not know fear?"

I laughed. "With all due respect, Your Highness, your question misses the point. Those who kneel in the face of fear do not become Seekers. It is because we choose to control fear that we attain powers that separate us from others."

In truth, Seekers were generally better in battle than ordinary soldiers. Earning a rank up in class meant breaking through the personal walls that stood in your way. Soldiers, who were trapped in the framework of the military, were unable to achieve this. It was for this reason that the nation valued Seeker independence and also why it appointed some of its best Seekers to important military positions.

If Caius wanted to put a collar on me, it meant he needed someone strong

under his control—and that he wanted a replacement for Johann.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” I said. “I know what you want from me, Your Highness. And that’s why I want to make it clear: I don’t need to be collared.”

The prince’s eyes narrowed. “Based on what you do outside of the public eye, I daresay it’s not *just* a collar you need. You should have a ball and chain. But that is just my opinion. Have your say. Convince me otherwise.”

“It’s simple. I have but one goal: to prove without a doubt that I sit at the top of the Seeker world. To achieve that goal, I need the appropriate challenge—I need the appropriate foe. And there are many to look forward to. The Valiant, for one, but also the Republic of Rodania and the Holy Cross Church.”

At my words, the prince’s breath caught in his throat. “You mean...”

“Our foes are not just beasts. Even if we defeat the Valiant, there are many who will swoop in while we are weak. I imagine this vexes you also. No need to worry, though. So long as I am here, I will purge any and all threats to our empire, because I—the man who killed Johann—am the very strongest.”

Caius knew Johann’s true strength, so he understood the weight of my words. “And you intend to prove this to the public through your tournament?”

I nodded. “The tournament will prove beyond a doubt that I am the strongest in the empire.”

“You won’t be able to turn any tricks in a public setting, you realize?”

“I won’t need to. When the time comes, you will see why.”

The prince thought for a time, then gave a nod of his own. “Fine. I will take you at your word. We will forget about the reparations, and I will give my personal recommendation to His Majesty that we hold the tournament. As an added bonus, I will award you with Lorelai’s requisitioned airship.”

“How very kind of you. Why the sudden show of generosity?” I asked, suspicious.

A bold smile brightened the prince’s face. “An airship is nothing for someone as truly valuable to our empire as yourself. But know this: as soon as your value drops, you will be cut and discarded.”

“I’d expect nothing less. I have no intention of being kept like somebody’s pet, so let’s approach this as a relationship of mutual benefit—as business partners.”

“Business partners. A most wonderful idea,” said Caius, staring at me. “I have one condition.”

“And what might that be?”

“It’s not of any disadvantage to you. In order to ensure that our partnership begins from a place of equality, I’d like to see you officially recognized as a noble.”

Somehow, I managed to choke back my bewilderment. “I don’t quite understand. My position on the regalia is more than sufficient. You shouldn’t need to go to such lengths. There’s no reason even to make our partnership publicly known.”

“At the moment, yes. But after the Valiant invasion, the empire will be plunged into upheaval. It’s unavoidable. Enlarging your power base now will come in handy later.”

He spoke with a smile, but there was no mistaking it: he was up to something. Agreeing to his condition now was a bad idea. However, if I didn’t have a valid reason to turn it down, Caius wouldn’t let it go. What was his real plan?

Thoughts raced through my head as Caius placed out his right hand.

“Let’s make this a fruitful partnership for the both of us,” he said.

He was the second imperial prince. I could not simply ignore his handshake. And if I did not give him something now, our discussion would only reappear later in the form of a grudge. In any case, right now he still saw me as a threat. Forcing what I wanted would only do me more harm than good. If that happened, it would crush the equilibrium between us, and Caius would put the entirety of his energy toward seeing me destroyed.

I had no choice.

I reached out for the prince’s hand with my own, and we shook.

“Your Highness, are you sure that was wise?” Caius’s butler asked after Noel had left the room. “Trusting someone like that, then promising to appoint him a rank among the nobility...are you not exceeding your own authority?”

Caius replied with hearty laughter. “Quite the opposite!”

“The opposite, you say?”

“Indeed. I am not giving him a position among the nobility as some kind of reward or benefit,” said Caius, still chuckling. “It is as he says: the beasts are not our only foes. There is Rodania, which is looking to expand its influence, and the Holy Cross Church, which is scheming for control from within Velnant’s borders. They are keeping their claws sharp as they lurk in the shadows, waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce upon us. With Johann gone, we need cunning, hard-headed Seekers like the snake to stand up to them. That said...”

The prince’s face hardened as he turned his gaze out the window.

“The snake is extremely dangerous. Before we join forces, he must be defanged.”

The whole empire heard the news that Wild Tempest had joined the regalia’s ranks either through the celebration or the official press conference. Though some were critical of a six-month-old clan joining the regalia, the vast majority supported the decision, and our sponsor count continued to grow. With the threat of the Valiant ever-looming, the people wanted a new hero.

It didn’t hurt that I was Overdeath’s grandson. He had killed Cocytus, one of the Valiants, in his own time. Many felt a certain fate and destiny in the idea that a clan led by Overdeath’s lone blood relative was the newest member of the regalia. Even I—a stark believer in carving your own fate—couldn’t help but feel an invisible momentum pushing me onward. For the ignorant, unenlightened masses, it was like bearing witness to a vast spiritual power.

From where I stood, it was merely convenient. There was nothing easier to control than a crowd that had chosen to believe in something it could not see. The people would support my ambitions.

Not everything was going the way I had hoped, though.

“That goddamn prince, I can’t believe he did that.”

I slammed the newspaper I’d been reading on my desk in the clan house office. The front page recapped a press conference held by none other than Caius himself. He offered praise for me and Wild Tempest for our appointment to the regalia, and he announced that as a reward for my efforts, he was publicly declaring me a noble.

This didn’t bother me—it was a condition I’d agreed to with my back against the wall. What *did* bother me was what came afterward: the revelation of my blood lineage, a fact even I was unaware of.

“In preparing to give Noel his title, we researched the Stollen family line and discovered something most surprising,” Caius had said. *“Noel’s grandfather, Overdeath Brandon Stollen, was in fact the illegitimate child of Gaspar d’Colette, a grand noble who lost his life in a tragic accident.”*

Shocking news, to be sure. I’d heard nothing of it from Gramps himself.

“Due to his illegitimate status, Brandon’s name was not listed among those of the d’Colette family line, but Gaspar was a kind man, and it is his name listed on Brandon’s birth certificate as the father. In short, we have official evidence of father and son. Just as Gaspar’s blood passed down to his son, Brandon, so too does Noel inherit this bloodline.”

The birth certificate talk was a lie. I had actually checked our family tree out of interest some time ago, and there was no mention of Gaspar’s name. Gramps was an illegitimate child, but the only name listed was his mother’s—my great grandmother.

So, yes, it was at least true that Gramps was the illegitimate child of a noble. I’d already had an idea of that. He was rough, rowdy, and violent, but there was a certain grace and charm to his bearing. I had never thought much of it at the time, but when I put things together with the details of Caius’s press conference, it seemed very likely he was of noble blood, illegitimate or otherwise.

The prince’s comment continued, *“At present, the d’Colette family has no successor to inherit their domain, so their territory is being managed between neighboring families. But now the lands can welcome a new lord; Noel Stollen is*

exactly the man for the job. And I, the second-born imperial prince, welcome this once-lost bloodline into the ranks of the regalia.”

Calling me the new lord of the d’Colette domain? I had no idea what the domain once was, but I knew it was in the middle of nowhere. There was no upside to being the lord of some backwater territory, and it was obvious that upkeep alone would run us into a deficit.

The man standing next to me snickered. “Got yourself in a pickle, eh? Typical coming from someone like Caius. He hit you where it hurts. A bit late of me to say, perhaps, but you should have played your cards better.”

My eyes flicked to the handsome, silver-haired fellow, who flashed a wicked smile as he looked down at me.

“With one move, he’s turned you from the people’s champion to the nobles’ champion. People love a rags-to-riches story of an ordinary man becoming a noble hero, but when the man in question was a noble to begin with, they feel tricked.”

I cringed in disgust as the man went on, his tone cold and heartless.

“Saying you didn’t know won’t fly. Proving that what Caius said is in fact wrong won’t be worth it—you’ll work very hard for very little in the way of results. And while Caius is indeed hurting you here, he has, as promised, attained the emperor’s permission for your tournament.”

We’d heard word of that just a day earlier, in fact. Caius and I were scheduled to hold a press conference to announce the tournament in the coming days. That was why fighting with the prince over my noble status at this point wouldn’t do me any favors.

“But when it comes down to it, the truth is the truth—your grandfather was indeed the illegitimate son of a noble.”

“I know,” I said, sighing. The situation wasn’t good.

“To get to the top as quickly as you have, you’ve been reckless. You’ve gone to extremes. The masses have lauded you as a hero because of it, but that all changes now that you’re of noble blood. Many will think it was a setup—that the nobles had planned for you to succeed all along. There will be backlash for

the things you have done.”

“I can’t use the newspapers to control the masses as I have in the past either. I weaponized the publishers with money and violence, but they didn’t follow my orders purely out of fear. Somewhere deep down, they were rooting for me as one of their own. Now that my noble lineage has been revealed, they have no reason to show me a shred of generosity. I have no idea when they’ll make a move to betray me.”

With just one announcement, everything had turned upside down. A whole number of things had suddenly become much more difficult. Not to mention the fact that I had to handle it while I prepared for both the tournament *and* the battle against the Valiant. Just how deep a grave was I digging for myself?

“Then why do you look so happy?” The man had read the workings of my heart.

“Happy? Piss off,” I grumbled.

“No, I can tell. You’re tickled now that you know Caius is a man who can cause you some trouble. It’s like you always say, isn’t it? You long for a foe who can satisfy you.”

“I will admit that Caius is cunning, but I would *not* put him on the level of a worthy foe. To him, I am simply a strength that he needs—and what he does now is little more than an attempt to weaken me in order to control that strength.”

“So isolated and alone, when the only place to prove your own worth is in battle.”

“Look who’s talking,” I shot back.

The man burst into hearty laughter. “You are right, of course! We are one and the same! And that is exactly why...” The man paused to gaze at me with sympathy in his eyes. “I hope, from the very depths of my heart, that you reach a place from which you cannot return.”

“Hmph. Keep dreaming.” I chuckled just as a knock came at the door.

“It’s Leon,” came the voice from the other side. “A moment, please?”

“Come in.”

When the clan’s vice-master walked in, he scanned the office with a look of confusion. “Are you alone, Noel?” he asked.

“It’s just me in here,” I replied. “I wasn’t even talking, got it?”

“Uh...yeah. I just...I’m sure I felt something...” Leon muttered, his head tilting in confusion.

I snickered. “You *do* remember this place’s sordid history, don’t you?”

Leon flinched, going pale. “If that’s a joke, it’s not funny.” He shook it off, looking at me more seriously. “The team is gathered in the conference room. We’re just waiting on you.”

“Got it. Let’s get everyone on board with the plan, ASAP.”

I got up and followed Leon out of the office.

“...So that’s where we stand.”

I had just given everyone a brief summary of our situation: the official greenlight for my gladiatorial tournament, Caius’s interference, and so on. All four of my team members—Alma, Koga, Leon, and Hugo—responded with troubled expressions.

“I daresay Caius seems rather obsessed with you, Noel,” said Hugo, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “So much so he’s put a collar on you.”

Grinning, I lit a cigarette. “He’s more troublesome than I’d expected.”

“It’s a hard world for a man so popular,” said Alma with a cheeky grin of her own. “I always knew you had a little magic about you to bewitch even men, but this noble stuff comes right out of left field. There’s nothing noble about you. Now, a gangster’s son? *That* I could believe.”

The other three answered in a single chorus: “Agreed.”

“What the hell, guys?” I muttered, breathing out a lungful of smoke. “This is no joke. Caius has us in a bad spot. We have to make the tournament a success if we want to get out of it.”

“Yeah, I know.” Alma tapped her chin, looking concerned. “It’s unlike you to mess up this bad. It’s not...an aftereffect, is it?”

Worried frowns and wrinkled brows abounded at her words.

“No,” I said flatly. “It was Caius. He’s sharp, and he’s cunning.”

Nobody looked particularly convinced.

In the battle with Johann and Lorelai, I had shortened my life span by half. At most, I had ten years ahead of me. I didn’t regret my decision in the slightest—if I hadn’t taken that course of action, we never would have brought Johann down. And it was *because* we defeated him that we had gotten to where we were. I’d paid a price, but the results were worth the cost. Everything was still within the realm of my expectations.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked. “Relax. I’m in better shape than I’ve ever been thanks to reaching A-Rank. You can all see that for yourselves.”

That was no lie. I felt *great*. The strengthening of my body thanks to my rank-up had helped take some of the strain off my brain. Alma, Leon, and Hugo nodded at my words, but Koga looked grouchy—he didn’t like it.

“If you’ve got something you want to say, Koga, then spit it out.”

“S’nothing,” he spat, looking away.

Koga had been like this ever since we fought Johann. He wasn’t a fan of me throwing away my life for the sake of battle. His attitude ticked me off a bit, but I didn’t comment. Instead I went on with the topic at hand.

“Anyway, you don’t have to worry about me. What’s most important right now is the tournament. The stadium construction is proceeding under Finocchio’s supervision. The Barzini family is also supplying the security detail and staffing for the stadium.”

“Is it safe to leave all of that with the mad clown?” asked Leon.

“It won’t be an issue. The Barzinis are a part of the larger Luciano family, who have had ties to the imperial family for ages. It’s too late for anyone to start complaining now, and this kind of industry has always been wrapped up with the mafia anyway.”

“I understand that well enough,” Leon said, rubbing his chin. “What worries me is the Lucianos’ internal power struggle. If this tournament is a success, Finocchio will make a killing. His standing in the family will skyrocket. He might even go on to become the next don. Isn’t it reasonable to predict that his fellow captains will try to interfere with our plans?”

“A pressing concern,” I replied, “and one that worries me, if I’m being honest. That gay clown talks a big game and says he doesn’t need my help, but we could all be in hot water depending on the actions of his rivals. We don’t want that.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Finocchio. I had great faith in him, actually, and I’d told him as much. The problem was that Finocchio was *too* successful, which earned him a lot of jealous rivals and enemies. Leon was right in that if the tournament went as it was supposed to, Finocchio’s rank would be set in stone. He wouldn’t be a part of the competition any longer; he’d be way too far in the lead by then. If Finocchio’s competition wanted to stop that from happening, this was their last and only shot.

“There’s going to be an executive meeting of the Luciano heads soon,” I told the crew. “We’ll get some inkling of the other captains’ thoughts then. They may be happy snapping up the leftovers, or they may push for a factional war—either way, we’ll get an answer. I have my informants digging, but they can only go so deep.”

“Should we...*handle* the groups that fall on the side of war?”

I was shocked by Leon’s question. “Never thought I’d see the day you’d get caught up in the gangster business. You got a grudge or something?”

“Don’t be stupid! I’ve no such thing,” Leon protested, mustering an awkward smile. “But we can’t let anything get in our way, right? Not now that we’ve come this far. The last thing I want is to get my hands dirty in gangster infighting, but I’m ready to wade through the mud if that’s what it takes.”

“Hmph. You’re a different man than you used to be,” I said, stubbing out my cigarette.

Leon was so upstanding and straitlaced, yet now he was trying to get his hands dirty. But I didn’t see this as a move in the right direction. This wasn’t calm, logical thought. This was someone lost in the thrill of having just defeated

Lorelai—someone high on having earned a spot on the regalia. If he didn't cool his head, that might be bad news for us.

If I tried to coax him out of his train of thought here and now, it would only have the opposite effect. After all, it would be like admonishing him for the same underhanded tactics I always employed. I could only chuckle in my mind at the way my own behavior had tripped me up.

"Sure, if it comes to factional war, I'll need you to fight. Finocchio's preparing for the worst. Considering what Caius is up to, though, I don't want to get into anything that draws too much attention."

"We won't be able to sweep it under the rug as easily as before, you mean."

"Violence is a last resort. It'll take more elbow grease, but we'll try to avoid family infighting peacefully through negotiation. My goal is for Finocchio to be the next don of the Lucianos. We don't want to spark future grudges and enmity by eliminating his competition in one fell swoop. There's no point in him becoming the boss if it fractures the organization."

"Can we solve that particular problem without violence?"

"We can. We just have to convince the other captains that Finocchio's the only person worthy of the top spot. I have a scenario in mind for achieving just that."

Leon nodded. "Understood. I trust your judgment."

"I'm going to be busy from here on out. We'll still have requests coming in from the Seekers Association, but I won't have the bandwidth to handle them. Leon, I'll need you to take the lead on that front."

"Leave it to me."

Now that we were part of the regalia, Wild Tempest would be getting more tasks than ever. On top of that, if we couldn't complete the beast assignments we received, our regalia status would be revoked. Now that Alma had reached A-Rank—thanks to our battle against Lorelai—our team could hunt high-level beasts even without me. A lord was still going to be a challenge, but they were comparatively rare.

“Let’s move on to the matter of the tournament,” I said, poking a finger at the papers on the table. “The rules are exactly as you all read in the documents I gave you.”

Rule 1: Participation is limited only to members of clans officially recognized by the empire. Each clan may put forth two participants.

Rule 2: Participants are allowed up to two skills. These skills must be disclosed in advance.

Rule 3: Weapons are permitted. However, weapons are limited to only those a participant can carry.

Rule 4: The competition will be run in a tournament format. There will be no referees to get in the way of the action.

Rule 5: Defeat is defined as the following: leaving the ring, being rendered unable to fight, giving up, or failing to stand up within a ten-count.

Rule 6: Follow-up attacks on an opponent rendered unable to fight will result in immediate disqualification.

“Basically, there are six rules. Rule one is in place to ensure foreign agents are kept out. By continuing to put limits on participation, we can ensure thorough background checks. There are a total of 72 officially recognized clans, including those in the regalia. This means that at most we will have a total of 144 participants. The competition will be broken up into two parts: the preliminaries and the finals. Any clan not in the regalia will start in the preliminaries.”

“Isn’t that a disadvantage for the teams outside of the regalia? They’ll have to fight so much more.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “In fact, it gives them more time in the spotlight.”

“How so?”

“The tournament is much more than a test of strength. It’s practice and

preparation for the battle against the Valiant. While more fights will exhaust competitors faster and provide their rivals with more information, anyone who performs well at the tournament—win or lose—is guaranteed a valuable position in the battle against the Valiant. After all, what we look for on the battlefield is not just those who are fortunate enough to win, but true Seekers: those who fight no matter the circumstances.”

“I see,” said Hugo. “Makes sense to me. I assume that is why you have implemented rule number two as well.”

I nodded. “Exactly. The rule lets us observe how a competitor fights when their skill set is limited and how they discern the skills of their opponents. It’s also in place to keep things competitive.”

“Competitive... Many have tried to make such a tournament a reality, but you are the first to create something tangible. It all comes down to the tournament’s damage transfer hardware. Developing *that* must have cost a small fortune, no?”

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged. “It was a necessary investment.”

The reason Seeker fighting tournaments had never been held in the past was simple: the threat of injury to the competitors. The whole point of Seekers was that they fought beasts, so there was no reason for a tournament that left them incapable of performing their actual duties. As such, no tournament plans had ever been finalized.

However, I’d spent an exorbitant sum of money on developing the special hardware we’d need to solve just this problem: the Megalith. Constructed from beast materials, the Megalith could be placed near the tournament ring, where it would absorb any damage taken by competitors linked to it. Though there was a damage limit, competitors would be essentially invincible while linked. When absorbed damage surpassed 80 percent, the linked competitor would be rendered immobile, unable to fight. The remaining 20 percent leeway was for competitor protection; it ensured that nobody would be injured by any follow-up strikes.

In the one in a million chance that the Megalith hit its damage limit, both competitors would be rendered immobile—this would be seen, in essence, as a

referee stoppage.

“The hardware was originally developed for the military. I bought it off the black market and left it with Finocchio to make it work for us.”

“And it cannot be used for fights against beasts?”

“No. The real hardware is not the Megalith but the colosseum itself. Think of the Megalith as a disposable cartridge. The damage transfer hardware is far too big for beast fights. On top of that, its area of effect is very limited, given its size. The only thing it *is* good for is exactly what we’re doing.”

“Interesting. That explains why research stagnated and the product ended up on the black market, where you got your hands on it.”

“Yep. We’ve also added some special settings. The Megalith absorbs damage but not the pain and shock from attacks. Say a competitor is cut by a blade; they’ll feel the equivalent pain and paralysis as long as they are linked to the Megalith. It’s actually worse for the internal organs. Damage can cause their functional levels to drop to baseline levels of survivability. If a competitor looks like they won’t be able to continue but the Megalith can still take more damage, we’ll recommend that they throw in the towel.”

“How about poison?” asked Alma.

“The Megalith also replicates the effects of poison. Though poison cannot enter the body as it would in real battle, the Megalith will detect it and apply the appropriate effects.”

Alma’s fists scrunched up with joy. “Yes! That makes me the strongest!”

Alma was an A-Rank Scout with a Death Apostle specialization. This battle-optimized subclass prioritized mobility and instant-death attacks, starting with poisons. She was without a doubt among the strongest potential competitors. Not only was she well suited to the tournament format, but she could also take down opponents with her overwhelming speed.

“Don’t get the wrong idea, Alma,” I said, shaking my head with a dry laugh. “I’m not putting you in the tournament.”

“What?! Why not?!”

“Your battle skills rely far too much on extremes.”

“What do you mean, ‘extremes’?! ”

“I mean that your skills only blossom when the battle is one of life and death.”

Leon had told me about Alma killing Zero on her own, even after he’d transformed into a dragon. Surviving and overcoming that battle had elevated Alma to A-Rank. I had always known, right from the very moment we met, that Alma was one of a kind, but that victory blew my expectations of her out of the water.

At the same time, Alma’s weak point had become painfully obvious.

“Alma, let me be clear: it takes you too long to get into the zone. Only after you were brought to the brink of life and death did you display your true abilities. The tournament battles won’t take you to that same extreme, which makes you unsuitable for it. You won’t be able to beat higher-ranked opposition.”

I must have hit a soft spot because Alma bit her lip and let out a growl. “Does that mean you’re going to put Leon and Hugo in the tournament instead?”

Leon had proven himself by going toe to toe with Johann, and in doing so, he’d boosted his capabilities by leaps and bounds. Not to mention that the very skill he had discovered, *Heaven’s Law*, was extremely powerful and would serve him well in the tournament. He had a good shot at beating an opponent of a higher rank.

Hugo was the most powerful fighter in Wild Tempest, and he even surpassed Leon with his newfound abilities. He would be at a slight disadvantage summoning his puppets to his side given the size of the tournament rings, but he had a wealth of experience. He could easily overwhelm the vast majority of opponents.

In spite of all that, I shook my head. “No, I won’t be putting them in the tournament either.”

Their jaws dropped—but they were even more shocked by what I said next.

“The Wild Tempest members fighting in the tournament are me and Koga.”

“What?!”

My clanmates’ shocked cries echoed throughout the conference room.

“Is it really that surprising?” I asked, smirking as I intertwined my fingers and put them on the desk.

“Why would it not be?” asked Hugo, sighing in exasperation. “I know how adept you are at battles against humans, Noel, and I understand that the tournament rules favor your style. But how is a Talker supposed to win the tournament?”

“Here’s the deal—I’m the organizer of this thing—I can’t *not* compete. It’ll set a bad example for the rest of the regalia’s clan masters.”

“Do you have a real shot at this?” Leon asked, his face taut with worry. “Please tell me you’re not thinking about using what you did against Johann again.”

“Of course not. I don’t have that luxury anymore.”

In the battle against Johann, I had used a secret concoction that ate at my life span. In return, I received the powers of a lord. It worked by using the magic in my body as an Abyss, which allowed me to summon powers and abilities beyond my own limits.

Thanks to that concoction, I had emerged victorious, but now I was looking at maybe a decade before I kicked the bucket. The sharp and sudden shift inside me had caused deep damage to my soul. A person’s soul was data—a blueprint for their life. One’s physical and spiritual self were built upon this blueprint, so when it took a hit, the result was a sudden and rapid degradation to that person’s physical and mental well-being.

I had attained A-Rank through my battle with Johann. The physical boost and the medicine I’d received from doctors had helped me to stave off the decay of my soul, but there was only so much we could do. I had ten years left. That was my time limit.

With the life I had remaining, I could not use that concoction again. My body would crumble the moment I tried. Lee-Gaku, the only person who could produce it, had died at my hands. There were no reserve shots; no second

chances.

“Even without that power, I have no intention of losing,” I told them. “That’s why I chose the specialization that I did.”

That specialization was, in fact, particularly well suited to battles against human opposition.

“I’m an Incantor now. When the conditions are right, I’m unbeatable.”

The Incantor was an A-Rank Talker subclass. It retained the buffer abilities I had before and opened up a number of unique debuffs. Originally, I had planned to go from Talker to Strategist to Commander, as most did—my buff skills and AoE would’ve been boosted considerably, and Commander was a much better specialization for battles against beasts than the Incantor.

And yet, I had decided on the latter. The reason was simple: unlike the Commander subclass, the only person to ever awaken the Incantor subclass in the history of the Talker class was me, and me alone.

Perhaps it was because I had, though only temporarily, become something beyond human and experienced death. There were no prior Seekers with this specialization, so I would have to explore and investigate it on my own. At the same time, I had an advantage in that my opponents had *no idea* what my skills were.

I had also bribed the Appraiser Association into silence when they helped me better understand my new subclass. As a public organization, they couldn’t remain silent forever, so we had agreed that they would keep the details of the Incantor subclass under wraps until after my death.

In the end, it was just as I had told Caius: our enemies were not just beasts. After the Valiant was vanquished, others would set their sights on the empire while it was still weak and vulnerable. And when that happened, the Incantor’s powers would become a necessity.

“I can beat anyone, no matter the opponent,” I said.

Alma didn’t look entirely convinced. “Okay, so I understand *you* competing. But Koga? He’s the weakest in the clan! He’s mincemeat the second somebody higher steps up to him!”

Koga scowled but made no attempt to retort. He was no weakling, but he was indeed the sole B-Rank member of Wild Tempest.

“Koga used to be a gladiator, which gives him more experience in the colosseum than any of us. He’s also from the east, where they have a different way of fighting. Pair that with his specialization, and he’ll be able to hold his own against a higher-level opponent. He can win.”

Hell, he had even put *me* through the ringer. I’d managed to eke out a win, but if Koga had been trying to seriously kill me back then, I would have been dead and buried.

“I understand your thoughts, Noel,” said Hugo, “but he won’t get far as a B-Ranker. We need him to rank up. He certainly has the potential. When is the tournament set to begin?”

“The preliminaries will start in three weeks’ time,” I replied, meeting Hugo’s gaze. “The finals will start one week after that. Caius and I are preparing to hold a press conference to officially announce the dates this week.”

“So we have about a month to prepare, then...” muttered Hugo, looking troubled. “Given Koga’s talents, we may just be able to make it.”

“Right, and that’s why I want you to assist him. And I’m not just talking beasts; I mean training with your puppets. He *can* rank up.”

“So you say, but this would be no ordinary training. Unless we put him on the brink and keep him there at the utter extremes, he will never find the door to a new rank and thus new potential.”

“But you can do that, can’t you?” I asked with a grin.

Hugo heaved a great sigh. “You always ask so much of us. I suppose I won’t be making any new dolls for the foreseeable future.”

“Thanks. There’s a fat bonus in it for you too. Koga, I presume you’ve got no objections? This training will be like wading through the river of death, but you’ll get ten times whatever you put in. Give it everything you’ve got.”

Koga responded with a resolute nod. “Got it. I’ll fight every battle like it’s my last.”

I liked his gusto. Alma, meanwhile, looked entirely unimpressed. “You’re going to help too,” I told her.

“Huh? You’ve gotta be kidding. Why me?!”

“You have your own weaknesses you need to overcome. As you are now, you’ve got limits.”

“Okay, so I’ll train on my own! I’m not gonna be Koga’s punching bag!”

“Shut it, Alma,” I said, keeping her in line with a quiet, controlled voice. “This is an order. You don’t get to refuse. And if you do...”

Alma’s face went pale and she backed away. “Hrk! F-fine! I’ll help!”

I settled back into my chair. “I will not stand for this again. Don’t you forget it.”

“All right, already,” Alma muttered. “You’re terrifying when you’re angry.”

I ignored her and sparked up another smoke. “That’s everything from me. I’ll be focused on the tournament, so Leon’s the lead for beast assignments. On the battlefield, his word is final. As for the rest of you, when you don’t have other assignments going on, you’re to focus on helping Koga earn a new rank.”

Everyone nodded, and our meeting came to a close. As we were about to leave the room, Leon called out, stopping us. Judging by his expression, he still had something on his mind.

“Noel, your ultimate goal with the tournament is to prove yourself the most appropriate person to command the battle against the Valiant, right? Now, it’s not that I don’t believe in you or Koga, but there’s no getting around the fact that you’ll be in some very difficult fights. I want to know what our backup plan is in the event that both you and Koga are knocked out of the tournament.”

Whenever I had a plan or a strategy, I always had several others to account for contingencies. Leon knew that, and he wanted to hear them.

However, I responded to his request with a shake of my head.

“This time, there is no backup plan. It would only get in the way. In some ways, backup plans will only weaken us. When you have a perfect plan, you don’t need anything else. And I can assure you: my goals will be met. If we’re

talking chess, then I've already taken checkmate."

"Checkmate? But the tournament hasn't even started."

Leon was clearly confused, but before I could answer, Hugo spoke up.

"Noel, I know what you intend to do."

"Well then, let's see if you're right," I said, inviting him to share.

"You said you do not intend to lose," Hugo answered with a grin, "but you do not intend to win either, do you?"

"You got it. Anything else?"

"If I am reading things correctly, then your real aim is..."

He went on to explain, and boy, did he hit the nail on the head. All I could do was applaud as the rest of the team stood there dumbfounded.

"Amazing!" I said. "Exactly right."

"We have not been working together long, but I do my best to understand how you think. Be that as it may, what you have come up with is unbelievable. You truly are the strongest Seeker." Hugo uttered the words with a certain amount of disbelief, then turned to look at Leon. "This plan hinges on you. If you want to make any revisions, now's the time."

Leon flashed something of a pained smile and shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary. It's the epitome of recklessness, but I've heard the details. Consider me on board. It's checkmate for sure—there's almost no doubt you'll end up as the commander."

"Reckless doesn't even begin to describe it," Alma said with a laugh. She knew nothing she could say would stop me. "The guy's practically insane."

And it was true—nothing anybody could say was going to stop me. I had long ago decided that this was my path, and my partners understood me.

Well, everyone except Koga.

"Are you outta yer mind?!" he bellowed. Koga's voice trembled with rage, and his breathing was ragged. "What the hell're you thinkin'?! First ya give away the better part of yer life to the fight with Johann, and now you go gamblin' on

somethin' like this?! Yer a goner!"

I stared at him and exhaled smoke. "It's not a gamble. It's a plan, and one with a high chance of success."

"But it ain't a *hundred* percent! Ya might actually die! As one of yer clanmates, I can't agree to this!"

I could hear Koga's words growing rougher as he talked, but it only made me laugh.

"Are you serious?" I asked. "You're going to say that *now*? I'm aiming for the top of the top. You think I'm afraid of death?"

"Yeah...I know how it sounds after everythin' ya did already. But we still got the option'a turnin' back, don't we?! Ten years! That's all ya have left! Shouldn't ya be more careful with that time?! What'sa point of bein' the strongest if yer dead?!"

Tears had sprung to the corners of Koga's eyes as he shouted, his voice like a desperate plea.

"I didn't join Wild Tempest so I could help kill ya, Noel," he said, fists clenching as his head drooped.

Nobody said a word. The silence in the conference room was deafening.

"I am who I am," I said. "And I'll live the way I choose."

"Ya still don't get it, man..."

"No, *you're* the one who doesn't get it, Koga. Would you have joined me if I were the kind of guy to play it safe? Didn't you choose to keep fighting for me because of who I am? Go on, answer me."

I glared at him, but Koga said nothing.

"Answer me, Koga!" I roared, my voice dripping with menace.

For an instant, Koga flinched at the palpable rage in my voice, but then he glared right back at me, storming up so close that our foreheads were practically touching.

"Yer right," he said. "I love the man y'are in your very soul. But I have my own

beliefs too. So it doesn't matter what you say, Noel, I am opposed to your plan."

"Well then, how do you plan to settle things?"

"Simple," Koga said, gripping the sword that hung at his side. "I'm gonna win the tournament. If I win, we don't need yer plan. I'll be provin' that you, my master, are the strongest. Nobody'll be able to say otherwise."

The Longswordsmen's words were a vow.

"Hmph. You? Win the tournament? Don't make me laugh. All you have to do is fight well enough that you don't make the rest of us look bad. Nobody expects you to win."

"Don't care. I said I'll do it, so I'm gonna do it," Koga said, more for himself than anyone else. He turned away from me. "I'll cut your plan to pieces. You just watch."

And then he left, with the rest of the clan watching him in silence.

With the clan meeting over, only Leon and I remained in the conference room. Koga, Alma, and Hugo had all left the clan house.

"What do you think about what Koga said?" Leon asked with a certain hesitancy.

I shrugged. "It's neither here nor there. He can get mad, and he can say what he wants, but you can't beat what you can't beat."

Sure, I believed in Koga's abilities. I also believed he would do well at the tournament. But some of the other competitors were true monsters. They dwarfed him in terms of power. The most terrifying of these were Velnant Empire's two strongest Seekers:

Supreme Dragon's vice-master, Zeke Feinstein the Innocent Blade.

Clan master of Pandemonium, Leo Edin the King Slayer.

With those two in the tournament, Koga could do whatever the hell he wanted—he still wasn't going to win.

“He just let his emotions get the better of him,” I said. “Once he cools down, he’ll realize how stupid he sounded.”

“But those emotions matter, don’t you think? Fortune favors the bold, as they say, and that means those with the will to do so *can* push beyond their own limits. No one knows that better than you.”

“Are you saying Koga and I are on the same level?”

Leon shook his head and grinned. “Of course not. No one alive can match you in willpower. Still, there’s no doubting Koga’s resolve either. Those weren’t just words spoken in the heat of the moment; he meant what he said. He really wants to protect you with everything he has.”

“So you’re telling me to take him seriously?”

“Exactly that. I was all for your plan at first, but Koga’s words made me realize something: you have to live, Noel. I want that for you too. You’re violent, wild, cunning, and you play dirty—and I still hold a grudge for how you broke up the Winged Knights. At the same time, I can respect how true you are to yourself and your way of life. I don’t want you to die. I’m certain that Alma and Hugo feel the same way.”

Leon’s words were persuasive, and though I wanted to push back against them, I couldn’t.

“I am who I am,” I told him. “I’m not about to switch up my style this late in the game.”

I had sacrificed so much to get here, but I had no regrets. I accepted it all, and I never doubted my choices. I blew out some smoke as Leon stood there looking a bit lonesome.

His voice was calm and measured as he replied, “I know. You are who you are, and there’s no need for you to change. But we want to support you. Let us at least have that.”

“I trust you and believe in you all. I rely on you. We would not have this clan without you.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Leon said with a shake of his head. “I don’t mean as

your fellow clan members; I mean as your friends.”

My breath caught in my throat. I was at a loss for words.

Leon let an awkward smile drift to his lips as he went on, “I’m as surprised as you are that I feel the way I do—but it’s the truth.” Then he straightened his posture into something more formal. “I’d better go. There are a lot of documents that require my attention.”

With that, I was left alone in the conference room.

“Wonderful teammates...or should I say wonderful *friends* you have?” came a mellow male voice. “You’re more blessed than you realize.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, stubbing out yet another cigarette in the ashtray. “Cut my plan to pieces, he says...”

I thought back to Koga’s declaration. I felt laughter bubbling up within me, making my shoulders shake.

“You’ve finally learned to talk the talk, Koga. I can’t wait to see how far you get.”

Truthfully, I was of two minds: I didn’t think he had a chance, yet I hoped he might make the impossible possible. The joy I felt in that contrast was so very special.

“I have been removed from my position as Wild Tempest’s coordinator. You will be notified of your new coordinator in the coming days.”

Harold clearly sounded dejected. It was an unusually warm afternoon for the season, and we walked a snow-covered path on the outskirts of the empire.

“This is Caius’s work,” Harold told me, “though he has done nothing directly. Since you were publicly announced as a noble, you have lost much support from the empire’s citizens. You can no longer use the people as a weapon, but others might easily swoop in to do just that. The Seekers Association has been correcting its prior mistakes. In truth, I *did* give you some noticeable advantages. Given the current circumstances, it would not look good for these facts to come to light. Thus, it’s necessary that I be removed as your

coordinator in the name of equality within the Seekers Association.”

Harold was right. The old man had allowed us to take on assignments above our clan’s level—most notably, the Noble Blood. Ordinarily, a clan with barely a year’s worth of experience wouldn’t be allowed to take on a lord-level assignment. But Harold had given us the chance, and that assignment had put us one step closer to a position on the regalia.

There had been criticism even back then, but I was a hero of the people. I’d proven Hugo Coppélia’s innocence and thwarted a prison bombing. In reality, I had been behind all of it, but the general public didn’t know any better. As such, the criticism was drowned out by the rising support for me as the empire’s hero—exactly as I’d planned.

“The jig is up. You can no longer abuse your sway over the people’s hearts and minds,” said Harold, lighting up a cigarette. “That said, there are still those who support you. You have always had fans. However, their numbers are far fewer than they once were. You rose on the waves of the will of the people, but this puts you in a most precarious position. Everybody loves a rags-to-riches story, but Caius has warped this to inspire dissatisfaction and hate. Though many see the realm of nobles as sacred, they feel betrayed when they catch sight of the political workings behind the scenes. It was a bold move by the prince—he knew it might affect his own reputation. That is the extent to which Caius sees you as a threat.”

Harold set a questioning gaze upon me, and I shrugged. “I responded as was required of me. The prince doesn’t trust me; he fears I’ll use the people to inspire a revolution.”

“That’s because of how you hold yourself. I would think exactly the same, were I the prince. Yet it is clear he also deems you someone essential to the future of the empire. I have heard that he went to quite the lengths to have your gladiatorial tournament approved.”

“Of course he did. It wouldn’t have made sense for me to take this loss if he didn’t.”

“So even an imperial prince is but a pawn in the game you play... You are truly terrifying. I must admit, that brazen arrogance puts me at ease. Here I thought

the prince's move might have set you back."

I frowned at Harold, who wore a cheeky grin. "Don't underestimate me, old-timer. The prince played a bold move and it took me by surprise, but it's a trifle in the grand scheme of things—it won't hinder my plans."

"Are you saying that my removal as coordinator was also part of your plans?"

Stopping in my tracks, I sent him a long look. "To be honest, that decision actually works in our favor."

"What does that mean?"

"From what I hear, they're sending you to Turmeghid."

"You've got a most admirable set of ears."

Turmeghid was part of the empire, located in the former kingdom of Mediola. It was one of three countries decimated by Cocytus the Silverfish and made part of imperial territory. The other countries were the former principality of Archillio and the former free cities of Mönch.

Plenty of fault lines crossed through Turmeghid, making it a site of intense pressure. If the Seekers Association's research was correct, a huge eruption would occur there within six months. That eruption would create a calamity of gigantic proportions: the arrival of the Valiant.

"Turmeghid is, essentially, a time bomb. It could blow up the entire world as we know it. We don't expect to sit idly by and let it happen, but preparing countermeasures to the Valiant will take time. If its arrival occurs sooner than expected, we will be slaughtered before we can do a thing." I grinned. "We need someone trustworthy on the ground before hostile forces can meddle in those lands. My influence only reaches so far, and you, Harold, are the one person in the Seekers Association I can put my trust in."

"I am undeserving of such praise," he replied. "Hostile forces *are* coming, then?"

"I can't say for certain, but chances are high. The empire has many enemies. I have the Faceless doing some digging in the Republic of Rodania, and as expected, they're up to something."

“Ah, the Faceless information broker. I have to assume what you’ve heard is accurate.” Harold let out a tired sigh. “I am far too old for this kind of thing. But if Rodania truly does have its sights set on toppling the empire, I suppose I’ll have no choice but to whip these weary bones back into fighting shape. We should be joining forces to combat a threat of world-ending scale, yet here we are preparing to be backstabbed. Humans truly are as vile as it gets.”

“The Rodanians probably have an ace up their sleeve for dealing with the Valiant. I think they’ll let the beast run rampant on us before coming in to exterminate. It’s exactly what I’d expect of them.” I spoke the words coldly, and Harold tilted his head.

“How goes your health, by the way?”

“I’m fine. There’s always the problem of my life span, but I’m still fit for battle.”

“I...I see. I’m glad to hear it.”

“Let’s go. It’s almost time.”

I set off without waiting for a response. Harold crushed his cigarette and followed after me.

“The empire’s Seekers are pursuing reform,” I said along the way. “Even if we win the battle against the Valiant, it will inevitably leave us weakened. Last time, our neighboring nations still had some fight left in them, but this will be different. If the empire—and *only* the empire—is weak, they won’t hesitate to move in to attack us. Our Seekers have to be stronger if we’ve any hope of preventing that. They’re looking for a new way, a better way, to conduct themselves.”

Until now, all you needed was a deep enough wallet and the strength to go with it. Yes, sometimes competition among rivals meant scheming and plotting, but it was all small-scale stuff. Johann and I had changed the game.

“The main purpose of Seekers is to fight beasts. We’ve focused on building experience and training ourselves with that goal in mind. Nobody had ever thought to use PR tactics or weaponize the will of the people. Likewise, no one ever thought of using industry and the very nation itself to achieve something

above and beyond all other Seekers. Or perhaps they did, but they were scared off by the cost or potential losses. Whatever the case, everyone stayed on the tried and tested track.”

“You achieved what everyone thought was impossible.”

“That I did,” I said, nodding. “If I hadn’t been here, Johann’s name would’ve reverberated across the entire empire. He would be the strongest Seeker. I felled him in the end, but that doesn’t mean we can take his efforts lightly. He was one step away from achieving the completion of his railway plans. Only the stupidest Seekers are blind to the importance of that.”

“In other words, the empire’s Seekers will follow in your and Johann’s footsteps.”

“We laid the groundwork, and many Seekers are already changing their ways. That’s why you were removed from your post. The Association is using the people’s disapproval of me to its advantage, and that’s a page right out of my own playbook. I’m a pioneer, and nothing makes me happier than seeing copycats. But now that I’m in the regalia, I’m no longer the one doing the chasing—I’m the one being chased.”

Even so, I would not let my pride get the better of me. I couldn’t allow myself to fall to those who would use my tactics against me. To prove I was the real deal, I had to push on even further ahead as I protected my position.

“Happy, you say? Well, as long as you’re enjoying yourself, I suppose. But please, do not forget that the one getting hurled off to the middle of nowhere is yours truly.” Harold spoke the words with a certain begrudging tone. I burst into laughter.

“You’re a trueborn imperial. You don’t want to rot away in the boonies.”

“I assure you it’s no laughing matter. I will do as I must, but in return, do what you can to see me returned to the empire promptly.”

“Got it. Old and gray as you may be, the empire still needs you. Your work won’t end with the defeat of the Valiant. I’ll make sure you come back.”

“If you don’t, I’ll be back to haunt you from the afterlife.”

Just as Harold finished his little joke, our destination came into view: a gigantic dome-shaped construction.

“It’s massive,” Harold remarked. “That’s the tournament colosseum?”

“It is. Holds up to fifty thousand spectators. The Barzini family is handling construction. They started building it three years ago as a performance hall, but it’s been modified to fit the colosseum’s needs. The place was pretty much finished, so I think they just had to install the Megalith and the various colosseum equipment. Now they’re just sprucing the place up.”

“Amazing. How very exciting! Seeing it with my own eyes makes me glad to have made it to this age.” Harold’s eyes glimmered with boyish delight.

“This is the first Seeker tournament in recorded history,” I said with a smile. “You’d better believe it’s going to be a blast.”

“Times are changing indeed. The tournament will be a chance to study the fighting styles of many warriors, not just yourself. Through this, we’ll see many a Seeker grow even more powerful than before.”

“It’s the beginning of a golden age, Harold,” I said, almost singing the words. “The golden age of Seekers is coming to the empire, and I will be standing at the forefront, head and shoulders above the best in history. Future generations will speak of me as the strongest Seeker who ever was.”

Harold nodded thoughtfully at my declaration. “You are already a Seeker the likes of which will surpass Overdeath.”

“Perhaps. If he were alive today, he wouldn’t deny it.” I looked skyward and added, “I don’t think he’d look favorably upon what I’ve done either.”

The blue winter sky was unbelievably clear. Was Gramps out there somewhere? And if he was, what expression did he make as he watched me?

“Noel...” Harold murmured, averting his eyes. It sounded like he wanted to say more but was unable to find the words.

“Anyway, enough of all of that,” I said. “I’ll show you the colosseum.”

I turned my gaze back on track and walked on.

The path I walked was mine alone, and there was no more turning back.

People thronged the colosseum as they attended to their individual tasks. The white building was spacious enough to house various bars and restaurants, all of which were already filled and set to open at the start of the tournament.

Harold and I ascended the stairs to the VIP lounge on the top floor. Glass walls looked out over the entirety of it, giving a clear view of all four colosseum rings.

“During the preliminaries, we’ll have matches running concurrently in all four rings,” I explained. “There are barriers set up around the spectator seats to ensure safety, even if a match is particularly explosive. The rings are also equipped with powerful barriers—the same ones that protect the empire’s borders.”

“Impressive. At a glance, it would appear you’re fully equipped in terms of general safety. I’ll make sure that goes in my report.”

That was why Harold was here: to report to the Seeker Association on the state of the colosseum. Although he was no longer our clan’s supervising coordinator, he was still expected to perform his duties so long as he remained in the empire. It was also his job to make sure there were no problems with my tournament plans.

“I’ve seen what I needed in terms of an inspection,” said Harold, “so I’ll take my leave. I am very much looking forward to seeing just how rowdy and riotous you make this tournament.”

Harold left, while I remained at the colosseum. I strolled around the facilities, checking once again for potential issues. There were concerns that foreign agents might put destructive schemes into play, so we’d set up a tight security detail, but you could never be too careful. I listed all the places one might set explosives and the locations that, if bombed, would cause the worst damage and passed it to the security chief.

With my own personal inspection over, I went to a quiet corner on the outskirts of the colosseum and lit up a cigarette for the road. I didn’t want to get in the way of everyone already working. As I stood there smoking, a familiar figure came into view.

“My oh my, if it isn’t my darling Noel.”

It was the ever-gaudy gay clown and boss of the Barzini family, Finocchio Barzini, in his usual garish makeup. He walked over toward me with elegant poise.

“I don’t suppose you came to check up on the construction progress, did you? You’re always such a pain like that, little one. Construction is going marvelously. Problems? None! Though I’m sure I told you just that via owl post already, didn’t I?”

“I know we’re on track, but I needed our inspector to see it too. He’s already gone, in case you were wondering.”

“You mean that dashing silver fox, Harold? That old man is *exactly* my type. Such elegance. I so wish I could have met him.”

“The fact that you didn’t saved me a lot of hassle.”

“And just what is *that* supposed to mean?”

Finocchio looked nonplussed. I laughed at him.

“It was a joke, Finocchio,” I said, stubbing out my cigarette and throwing it in a nearby garbage can. “The two of you will meet in time. Anyway, what about you? Here for an inspection yourself?”

“I come here periodically to do personal inspections. I’m not much for having to deal with the other executives’ complaints. You should be grateful.”

“Admirable efforts. The tournament will be the biggest event the empire has ever seen. And it won’t be just the common people who come—it will draw royalty, nobility, and the rich and influential. All the more reason it’ll be targeted by foreign agents. Our facility checks and security have to be up to spec. I just handed the security chief a list of potential danger zones—I want you to check it as well.”

“Fine, fine. Yes, sir. Every time you come, my workload increases. You realize that even workaholics require breaks, no? You’re going to work yourself right to death.” Finocchio let out a sigh of disbelief. “But this *is* an important time, so I suppose it’s only natural to err on the side of paranoia. To be honest, when we

first met, I didn't think you'd get this far. Color me shocked at you making it all the way to the regalia. If you'd told me back then that this was going to happen, I'd never have believed you!"

"Quit talking like you're out of the game. The regalia was never the goal; it's just a stop on my way to bigger and better things. But it's the same for you, isn't it? The real game starts now."

"You're talking about *you-know-what*, aren't you?" Finocchio asked, lowering his voice and scanning the room to make sure nobody was around. "I'm ready for whatever battle may come. I'll kill as soon as I have to."

"About that..." I locked eyes with Finocchio. "No killing. We'll solve that problem by way of negotiation."

"Huh?! The hell?!"

"That damned prince has changed the playing field. I can't afford to stand out."

"Excuse me, but that's *your* problem. It's got nothing to do with me," Finocchio said, crossing his arms with a chuckle. "I'm well aware that Caius caught you in a trap of sorts. What a blunder! So very unlike you. I understand you want things to be nice and quiet in the lead up to the tournament. You can be as discreet as you like—I'm going to do my own thing."

Sunset came early in winter, and the deep red of the sinking sun cast complicated shadows across Finocchio's face as the clown went on.

"Lots of simmering grudges out there at my control of the colosseum. If I leave them be, they will scheme and they will collude and it will result in trouble and damages. The organization's leaders are middlemen at present, but they could get dragged into the mess. There is no way to settle this other than by bloodshed."

"I know, but I'm concerned that you won't have enough strength behind you."

"Oh, shut it. I have an elite group at the ready. I don't need your help in the slightest." Finocchio glared at me before continuing. "Besides, aren't you the one who told me to kill the guys at the top who get in my way? There's no

chickening out now that we're this deep in the game. Don't disappoint me now, snake."

"I'm telling you, things have changed. You're going to take me to the executive meeting for the Luciano heads. I'll make a deal with them."

Finocchio balked. "You?! At the executive meeting?! Are you mad?!"

"I'm dead serious," I replied, nodding. "I already have a scenario prepared for it."

"A scenario. Hmph! Because you're a Talker, no doubt. Because no matter how high up the mafia chain you go, you can talk people into anything. That's your god-given gift. When you say you'll do something, by hook or by crook you make it happen, don't you? What am I to do? I suppose I'll just give up. There's nothing more for me to do—I have my lord and savior the regalia... Is that what you expected me to say, you idiot brat?!"

Finocchio spat the words with rage as he grabbed me roughly by the collar.

"I am not some puppet you can just play with! What do I care about your screwups?! I will kill and maim as I so please! I don't take orders from you!"

I could feel it from the clown—not just anger welling up within him but a real murderousness too. None of it fazed me in the slightest, and I let a grin curl upon my lips.

"Easy with the threats there, Finocchio. You'll only wear yourself out."

"You think just because you're in the regalia, you can mouth off?! Don't get ahead of yourself, boy!"

"I'm not. And it's not because I'm in the regalia that I'm not afraid of you. I know that you love me."

"Whaaaat?!"

Finocchio practically screamed the last word in utter shock. He released my collar and staggered backward.

"A-a-are you out of your mind?! Y-y-you're saying I am in love with a piece of trash like *you*?! Unbelievable! Of all the things you could have possibly said! Idiot! Fool! Foolish idiot!"

As he continued to splutter in denial, Finocchio's face went as red as the setting sun. I walked up to him, a grin still plastered on my face.

"I am begging you, Finocchio. Just this once, please do as I say."

"B-but if I changed direction now, my men, they'd..."

"They'd understand," I said. "They know us. They understand us."

"Ooh... But, but... But!"

"Can you not hear what I'm saying to you, Finocchio?"

"F-f-f-fine! Just don't come any closer with that beautiful face of yours!" Finocchio sprang away from me, covering his face with both hands. "But just this once, and *only* this once! There will not be a second time, you hear me?!"

Having said as much, Finocchio ran off into the distance. I watched him go and heaved a great sigh.

"He's a real stand-up guy, but his personality is something else."

The day before the press conference with Caius, I found myself at the hotel in the capital where I once held my symposium. I had been summoned to the conference room on the top floor. I sensed a number of people behind the thick doors, and I knew they sensed me too. I could feel their gazes even through the wood.

"Quite the welcome," I muttered with a chuckle.

I put a hand to the doors and pushed them open. Everyone was already assembled at a round table. It was a group of heroes: the clan masters of the regalia.

Arthur McBain, clan master of Blade Flash.

Dolly Gardner, clan master of Goat Dinner.

Mace Kahn, clan master of Kahn.

Wiseman, clan master of Cave of the Universe.

Victor Krauser, clan master of Supreme Dragon.

And in place of the clan master of Pandemonium—much like at my ordination—was vice-master Sumika Clare. Leo Edin, ever the free spirit, was nowhere to be seen.

Just like every other clan and Seeker party, the regalia held a monthly meeting to report on their individual activities. This was why I had been summoned. The meeting was by no means compulsory, but as the regalia was a rank recognized by the imperial family itself, skipping a meeting without an appropriate reason had a lasting impact on how you were assessed. If you weren't a team player, and you chose to be selfish, your rank might be revoked and your clan couldn't say a thing about it.

Nonetheless, Leo had been absent for both my ordainment *and* this regalia meeting. Did he not care about his rank? Curious as I was, I didn't want to waste time thinking about it—not when there was something out of place in the air that I couldn't ignore.

All the other members of the meeting had already assembled. It was ten minutes before the meeting was due to start, and it wouldn't have been strange to think that everyone was here because they were careful about being on time. The problem, however, was in the amount of dust in the air. Including the amount from my entrance, it was all too little—that meant that quite some time had passed since everyone had entered the conference room.

Had I gotten the meeting time wrong?

No, I thought, there are ulterior motives at play.

"Well, well. I see you all beat me here," I said with a smile. "I apologize that the newest member of the regalia happens to be late to the meeting. I see you intended to get here...rather early."

I took the one empty seat closest to the entrance. The seating was arranged in terms of rank, from third tier to first tier.

"I have to hand it to you," I continued. "You're not just punctual, but you've also made adequate time to talk among yourselves. I must admit, I'm jealous you have such roomy schedules. Am I right to assume this is a gossip session?"

I tilted my head in a show of curiosity. At the far end of the table, Victor's face

betrayed his surprise, but he covered it with an awkward grin.

“That we met earlier was not in any way meant to shut you out, Noel,” he said. “Though I am very sorry if doing so hurt your feelings. I am the one who made the decision, and you have my apologies.”

Victor made no attempt to hide the fact that he had given me the wrong meeting time. It all made sense—they’d met before I arrived so they could discuss how to handle me.

“No hard feelings whatsoever. In fact, I couldn’t be prouder of the fact that my esteemed superiors would be so worried as to gather before my arrival. To think that the regalia itself would fear a youth with only half a year of clan experience to his name. It feels fantastic! Why, I could almost sing about it. Shall I?”

“Know your place, boy.” The angry voice came from my left—Blade Flash’s Arthur. “You’re a junior as far as the regalia’s concerned. How ’bout acting the part?”

“Acting the part! Indeed!” I replied, looking at Arthur as I propped my feet up on the table and lit a cigarette. “Is this enough for you, Sir Arthur?”

“Why, you—” Arthur stood from his chair, but a sharp command from Victor stopped him in his tracks.

“Enough.”

Arthur sat reluctantly.

“The young are passionate and aggressive, as is their right, but there is a time and a place for such behavior,” Victor said, sighing before looking me in the eye. “Noel, first let me congratulate you on your appointment to the regalia, and on becoming the empire’s newest guardian star. Second, welcome to the regalia meeting. As you are likely well aware, I am Victor, the clan master of Supreme Dragon. Consider me the chairman for these meetings.”

“Well then, *Chairman* Victor, do you mind telling me why exactly you essentially barred me from coming? As I recall, it’s for reporting on our clan activities, not for plotting the downfall of any particular person. Such scheming should not be allowed, even by the head honcho.”

“You raise a worthy point, and you shall have a thorough explanation. Before we get into that, however...” With a sudden gust of wind, my cigarette vanished. “This meeting is nonsmoking.”

Victor now held my cigarette in his hand, which he stubbed out. It had to have been some sort of skill, and whatever it was, it was *fast*. Even though my guard was up, I hadn’t even been able to detect it. There was no doubting it, though—Victor and Leon were made of the same stuff. The flow of their magic was far smoother than that of any ordinary Seeker because they had *Heavenly Wings*, the ability to launch skills at very high speed.

Even if Victor was getting weaker with age, he was still EX-Rank. He was still every bit worthy of his nickname: Beginning One.

“The reasons for this meeting sit with you, Noel,” he explained, placing his elbows on the table and lacing his fingers together. “I find your proposed tournament to be a wonderful idea. However, is it not all proceeding quite quickly? It came as quite a shock to the rest of us.”

“My appointment to the regalia is the sole reason I could pitch the idea. Nobody could have known unless they were prescient—none of you. Moreover, none of you would have taken me seriously.”

“That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re talking about how quickly it was *approved*. And we understand that your press conference with Prince Caius is tomorrow, yes?” Victor’s gaze grew a touch sharper.

Ah, so that’s what this is about. I now understood the circumstances and Victor’s point.

“You suspect me of colluding with Caius to put you all at a disadvantage?”

“Precisely. We do not easily lend our ears to the rumors of the common people, yet we also have no reason to trust you. You said that the tournament would be helpful in deciding the supreme commander in the battle against the Valiant, did you not? There is some truth to your words. If we are to believe the documents you sent us, we can compare our strengths in fair competition, without fear of injury. That being said, those making the final decision are the Seekers Association and the government. How are we to believe that they won’t be influenced by you, the event’s organizer?”

The question was nothing if not direct.

“Hmph,” I snorted. “Not the question I’d expect from the first tier of the regalia. So it’s not just me but the Association and the government that you don’t trust? I don’t suppose you’re a fan of conspiracy theories, are you?”

“Don’t try and change the topic, boy,” snapped Dolly of Goat Dinner, sitting to the right. “There’s no point to playing dumb. It’s clear that you and Caius are in cahoots. Isn’t that what you should be explaining first?”

“The word ‘collude’ is misleading, Miss Gardner,” I replied. “The tournament will be an event on a scale the empire has never seen before. It’s only natural that it should involve the cooperation of the nation’s leaders.”

“What I’m talking about is *how much* cooperation. That’s where the problems start. Just because you’re the organizer, that doesn’t mean you’re entitled to free rein. It’s your responsibility to prove your innocence, isn’t it?”

“No, I have no such obligation,” I declared, swinging my feet off the table and glaring at Dolly. “The privileges of the regalia were bestowed upon us by the imperial family and, in following, the government and the Seekers Association. If you don’t trust them, fine. But if that *is* the case, you should give those privileges back.”

“Jumping the gun a bit, aren’t you? Go on, tell us what you’re really up to.”

“There we go. Cat’s out of the bag now, hmm? You say I’m in cahoots with Caius, and all your criticism is based entirely on that. In that case, it wouldn’t make sense for you to foist all the accountability on me, would it? If you won’t demand the same of Caius—and, by extension, the government and the Association—then doesn’t that prove my innocence? Have you not shown that we are not in collusion?”

Dolly made to argue, then paused for a moment. “Of course it’s not just you. We will also talk to Prince Caius.”

“Such resolve. You’ll be relinquishing your regalia privileges, then, I assume?”

“It’s true that the privileges we enjoy were bestowed upon us by the government and the Seekers Association. But that does not mean abandoning our independence as a Seeker organization. In fact, it is *because* we are

independent that we have a responsibility to ensure that the government and Association don't run wild. What I am asking does not run afoul of the regalia's values."

"A fallacious point. If this were truly a matter of patriotism, you'd be able to wrench yourself free of the privileges you now hold. Since you can't, your pretty words hold no weight."

Dolly gritted her teeth as I calmly dismantled her argument. She'd underestimated me. She thought she could attack me from a place of safety without fear of repercussion, but I was not about to let that happen.

"Miss Gardner," I went on, "what you claim isn't even in the realm of criticism. There's no validity to it whatsoever. How about we put a stop to fighting enemies that we cannot see?"

"You...!"

"When it comes to the pursuit of justice, I must agree with you. This *is* the duty of the regalia. Thus, I will bring to light charges of my own. Miss Gardner, you sought to conspire with me to assassinate Johann Eissfeldt. This action *did* run afoul of the regalia's values. You are unsuitable for your spot within it."

Shock rippled through the room. Dolly's face in particular made for quite the sight. She had never believed in her wildest dreams that I would blow the whistle in a place like this. Her face went pale and her lips trembled.

Dolly had been aggressive and confident because, as far as this meeting went, I was on my own. The regalia had even gathered to prepare for this moment before I arrived. She had taken me too lightly and expected me to be meek and cautious—she assumed nobody would believe me if I revealed her schemes and, in all likelihood, I would only undermine my position.

She was mistaken. I was not the only one who stood alone in this meeting; so did everyone else. They had merely come together in a temporary show of cooperation to put pressure on me. If this weren't the case, there would've been no need for them to meet early before confronting me. Instead, they might've been conspiring to do so all this time. The fact that they hadn't—that they couldn't—proved one thing: there was no trust between the individual clans of the regalia. None of them could cooperate when they had to worry

about their fellow clans potentially getting the jump on them. And if they couldn't trust each other, it meant that my revelation would still be effective.

The members of the regalia turned on Dolly with cold, hard stares. Dolly had made a mistake in judgment, but she wasn't an idiot. Rather than dig herself any deeper, she waited silently to see what would happen next—she knew that my comments alone would not be enough for her to lose her position.

"I understand where you're coming from, Noel."

Victor's calm demeanor never faded, but I felt the tiniest tremor of frustration from him. I could read the most minuscule movements in a person's face and note the slight changes in their mood. I wasn't about to let a single thing slip through my grasp.

"However, you must step into our shoes as well. At present, we cannot trust you. I would like to say that so long as we cannot trust you, we cannot take part in your tournament, but we have no proof to back up our suspicions. It would be one thing if it were just you, but we can't afford to tarnish the prince's reputation." Victor sat up a bit taller. "So, we would like to propose a compromise."

"A compromise?" I asked. "And what might that be?"

"We want you to appoint us to manage the tournament. If you allow that, we will put our trust in you."

I could only laugh at the suggestion. "Are you for real? None of you have invested anything in the tournament, and you're asking me to give away a portion of my rights as organizer? That's beyond ridiculous."

"Naturally, if you are willing to concede to our compromise, we are prepared to pay accordingly. The tournament comes at great cost. This isn't such a bad deal for you, wouldn't you say?"

"I won't deny that it's expensive. But if you're taking a cut of the earnings, nothing changes. I can't agree to that deal."

"We are not asking for a cut," Victor said with the hint of a smile. "All the profits are yours. Your efforts—and yours alone—will make the first-ever gladiatorial tournament between Seekers a reality. We would not be so

shameless and sly as to scrape profits off the back of your hard-earned achievements.”

I knew immediately that Victor was alluding to my past with Johann. I had taken his railway project rights and made them worthless, thus securing a path for my clan to join the regalia. Everyone else at this meeting knew what I had done.

“There is nothing but profit in this for you,” said Victor.

“It’s not so bad, then, I must admit.”

Truth be told, the tournament was prohibitively expensive. I was setting it up with the assistance of the Barzini family, but the vast majority of the costs landed on my shoulders. It was no lie to say that Victor’s offer was very tempting.

“My answer’s still no,” I said with a sneer. “It doesn’t make sense. You may worry about my honesty in all of this, but if I let you pay your way onto the management board of the tournament, all that does is draw the ire of the empire’s other clans. They’ll call foul play. As head organizer, I’ll be the scapegoat. There’s far more for me to lose than to gain here.”

“We have no intention of appropriating the tournament for our own goals. We have no issues with the rules as you have decided them. We will not question your management decisions outside of clear and obvious problems. We merely wish to be placed in a position equal to your own so we can ensure that all competitors are evaluated fairly.”

“Fat chance. The six of you literally just tried to back me into a corner, and now you’re saying you won’t interfere? You can get out of town with that kind of nonsense, old man.”

“We are not like you, snake.”

The eloquently spoken comment came from the man at Victor’s side: Wiseman, clan master of Cave of the Universe.

“If the other clans take issue with the decision and call foul play, we will stand before them and explain the situation. We will also do so in a way that ensures you and Prince Caius do not lose face. We frown upon stepping on others to put

ourselves in advantageous positions.”

“And you expect me to believe that?”

“Fairness is, in the first place, not fair and just treatment for everybody—it is a compromise that everyone agrees to,” said Wiseman. “And what is that compromise here? It is restraint. Ensuring that there are people in place to control your behavior should you get out of control leads to further trust. In this sense, your worries are entirely unfounded. This is merely the basics of society at work.”

“While I agree with what you’re saying, you’re missing the point. I’m saying I don’t trust *you*. Diverting from the main point by talking from a place of superiority is old hat for swindlers. Seems to me you might be better suited to *that* than being an actual Seeker.”

Wiseman giggled. “The epitome of despicable. Perhaps before slandering others as swindlers, you should take a look at your own actions. Do not forget that when you spit at the heavens, you only spit upon your own face.”

“Lucky I’m spitting at you and not the heavens, then. Just when I thought that dirty face of yours was getting a little prettier, now I can’t even stand it. Sorry, but do something about it, would you?”

Wiseman’s eyes went wide and a vein bulged in his temple. The man was clearly a narcissist. Of course he was going to lose it the moment I called his looks into play. I looked away from Wiseman—who’d gone speechless with anger—and turned my attention back to Victor.

“However unfortunate, I refuse your proposal,” I told him.

“I see. If that is your answer, then there is nothing more to be said. We will not be participating in your tournament. I cannot imagine how valuable your tournament will be without the regalia in it, but I must assume its value will plummet. It hurts me to think of the losses incurred from this mistake and how they will fall on your shoulders.”

I chuckled. “Save me your crocodile tears.”

“I assure you, I do worry about you.”

“Not that,” I said, my grin morphing into a fierce glare. “Do you really think you’ll convince me with that line about not participating? Am I a kid to you? You can say whatever you want, but you have no other choice—you’ll compete in my tournament.”

“And what makes you think that?”

“It’s simple. Outside of the tournament, there won’t be another opportunity to select a commander for the battle against the Valiant. What, you’re going to decide it through some friendly discussion? I don’t think so. If that were a possibility, you would have decided on a leader long ago. What else is there? Deciding through actual battle? Not gonna happen. What point is there to taking the position through violence if it results in us losing the manpower we need for the battle that matters? What’s left, then? Doing the same thing as me? Impossible. Even if you started preparations now, you’d never make it in time. And even if you forced it, holding a proper tournament is simply not possible.”

I took another cigarette out and sparked up. I let the smoke waft out into the “nonsmoking” room before going on.

“In other words, the one and only public location for deciding the commander in the battle against the Valiant is *my* tournament. There is nowhere else. And only *I* am capable of giving you that place. I am the rules.”

Everyone sat there, silent and stone-faced.

“Let me make this clear right here and now,” I said. “Even without the tournament, I would be the commander. You all know that’s the way I fight. The problem is that none of you are convinced yet. You can’t stand the thought of being pieces on the battlefield for me to use against the Valiant. And that is exactly why...” A broad smile spread across my face. “I will use the tournament to prove to you all who is most suitable.”

Someone groaned.

Arthur crossed his arms, his brow scrunched in a frown. “With all that braggadocio, I figure you’re competing in the tournament yourself, yeah? Every clan is allowed two competitors, but you can’t mouth off and then let your clanmates do the fighting for you. Nobody’s gonna respect that. So, what’s it

going to be? Answer me that, snake.”

I let a moment of silence pass, then nodded confidently. “Of course I’m going to compete in the tournament.”

At that, a commotion broke out in the conference room.

“Are you fer real?!” Mace cried. “You’re a Talker! Yet you’re going to fight?! You foolish brat! If you’re going to apologize, now’s the time! Don’t want to find yourself humiliated in front of tens of thousands of spectators, do ya?”

“You look about as excited as a stray dog who’s found some scraps, you geezer. Better watch you don’t give yourself a heart attack and die.”

“Big words, brat. But a man doesn’t back down from his word—Kahn will compete in your tournament! I want to see how the weakest job fights from the best spot in the entire tournament—the ring itself!”

Mace was practically shouting now, and he whirled on the rest of the table.

“And what about the rest of you? You got this little asshole trying to make a fool out of all of us. You just going to turn tail and go home?”

“Blade Flash will compete,” said Arthur, nodding.

“Goat Dinner is in.”

“No other choice, huh? Cave of the Universe will be there.”

“Pandemonium too.”

That left only Victor.

“My, my. All of you are so hot-blooded. If I were to refuse after you’ve all thrown your hats in the ring, I would only spoil the party. Supreme Dragon will compete in your tournament.”

He grinned, showing off a row of pearly white teeth.

“I respect your courage, Noel,” he said. “May the battles be great.”

Victor looked less like a smiling old man in that moment and more like a ferocious beast baring his fangs. I knew what everyone here wanted; I didn’t even have to think about it. They intended for me to participate in my own tournament. Not only did my entry mean one less slot for a more battle-ready

member of Wild Tempest, but it also made it easier to show I'd be an unsuitable commander.

All that bluster about wanting to be part of the tournament management had been a bluff. They knew I wasn't going to yield to their pressure, so their aggression was a farce to limit my available choices. It had been their plan all along to provoke me into pushing back, stringing me along till we reached their desired outcome. They knew my personality, and they'd built their strategy around it.

Unfortunately for them, they'd gotten it wrong. I'd fully intended to compete in the tournament, and not one of the regalia clan masters had been able to discern that. They believed I was caught in a trap, not realizing that they had inadvertently stepped into one themselves.

The moment you all decided to compete in the tournament, you sealed my ultimate victory.

Perhaps we were all thinking the same thing:

"I am the strongest."

While Noel was attending the regalia clan masters' meeting, Hugo, Koga, and Alma were in a basement training facility in the imperial capital. The training area was huge and offered simulations of a variety of environments.

Currently, the Wild Tempest trio occupied a mountainous area. They weren't actually at a high altitude, but the necessary conditions were in play—low oxygen levels and difficult terrain among them. A cold wind raged across the rocky mountains where Hugo stood, some ten puppet soldiers waiting by his side.

"Are you done?" he asked.

The question was directed at Koga, who had fallen at his feet. The Longswordsman was no better than a used rag—exhausted, worn out, and on the verge of falling to pieces. His armor was in tatters, his body was covered in deep cuts, and his arms and legs were bent at all the wrong angles. His organs couldn't possibly have been in good shape. Even then, Koga would not release

his grip on his sword.

This scene had occurred a total of fifteen times so far.

“N-no... Not yet. I can...I can still fight!” Koga rasped, his voice no stronger than the buzz of a mosquito.

His eyes burned with a desire to push through, but his body was well past its limits. He struggled to stand to his feet, but his broken fingernails scratched hopelessly against the ground.

All the same, Hugo nodded. “Then let us continue.”



On cue, the puppet soldier closest to him moved toward Koga. The puppet—a melee type—hoisted Koga off the ground and punched him square in the solar plexus. Its merciless attack sent Koga slamming into hard rock. He spat out blood and crumpled to the ground. He was no longer able to move his body and had, on this occasion, fallen completely unconscious. He hovered so close to the brink of death it was unclear whether he was even breathing.

Hugo checked to make sure that he was, then gave an order to a different puppet soldier: “Heal him.”

The support-type puppet soldier lifted its wand and sent a warm light toward Koga. Koga’s wounds healed in an instant. Be that as it may, the damage he received would not vanish so quickly, and even though his wounds had healed, it would be some time before he could move.

Hugo decided it was time for a break and sat down. The Puppeteer was not tired—at least, not physically. Noel had given him the task of overseeing Koga’s training, and they were still at level one. Hugo had only created ten puppets. He could easily summon more, but he *did* feel some mental fatigue. He had no interest in cruel, cold-blooded abuse, yet he was now in a position where he had to force his own clanmate to surpass his limits. Though his relationship with Koga was still in its early days, they had already been through a lot together, and it pained him greatly to bring the man to the edge of death so many times.

But the truth of the matter was that if Koga could not overcome these trials, an early rank-up was a fool’s dream.

“He’s hopeless.”

The derisive comment came from the peak of the area’s pillar-like mountain, where Alma sat cross-legged, a wicked grin across her face.

“It’s a pipe dream,” she said. “There’re only ten puppets—well, nine if you forget about the support type—and he can’t do a thing. Koga’s useless, that’s all there is to it.” She offered a shrug, and Hugo sighed.

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “His training has only just begun.”

“I’m talking about his latent potential. I don’t see any.”

“If we’re strictly talking potential, Koga surpasses even me.” It wasn’t a baseless compliment. Koga *could* go much further than Hugo.

Puppeteer was widely considered the strongest of all classes, and Hugo had won countless battles. He had become aware of his own skill ceiling long, long ago. At the age of eighteen, he realized he would reach a plateau and never get any stronger.

Though he knew he could improve his abilities through persistent training, he was also aware that he would never equal those who stood at the very top. And as he grew more certain of the fact, his own potential began to taper out.

Hugo had never been much of a fan of violence to begin with. It was not in his personality. He had become a Seeker purely out of a need for money. His goal from the beginning was to accumulate enough wealth to quit the Seeker profession and pursue his dream of doll-making. And he had achieved that very thing. So the idea that he had limits was not particularly shocking. And perhaps it was because of his nature that Hugo would never stand shoulder to shoulder with those who reached EX-Rank.

A rank-up was, in essence, a single biological evolution within a set species. Evolution was the development of new powers to adapt to environments over generations. It was not something that occurred within a single individual. To bring forth evolutions that could not occur in the natural world, humans relied on the power of appraisers.

However, appraisers were not all powerful. The ability to rank up was only available to a select few with prodigious talents. From C-Rank to B-Rank, from B-Rank to A-Rank, and from A-Rank to EX-Rank—the number of people capable of ranking up grew exponentially fewer with each level.

Even when a person had the *potential* to rank up, they still needed to clear the necessary conditions. Speaking strictly of battle specializations, this meant achieving victory in situations so dangerous that every single cell felt thrummed with the desire to evolve and *survive*. Doing so would open up their path to the next rank.

If potential was the gate to the next level, then an iron will was the key to opening it. On Hugo’s path, no such gate or key to EX-Rank existed. Hugo’s boss,

Noel, had done things differently—he had forcefully built a gate to the next level, then forsaken any sort of key and instead bashed the gate open himself. This was an extremely rare exception, however, not something that could be easily replicated.

Conversely, Koga had the talent to rival the living gods of EX-Rank. Hugo had seen countless Seekers in his time, and he knew real potential when he saw it. One day, Koga would reach EX-Rank. Lurking within him was the necessary key—an endless hunger for strength and the willpower to achieve it. The problem was that for all the potential that Koga held, getting to A-Rank before the tournament finals was a Herculean task.

“Could you help me with his training, Alma?” asked Hugo, rising to his feet and looking up at her.

“I don’t see why you’d need my help.”

“We can take turns fighting him. His fighting abilities will improve faster if he faces different opponents.”

Even if Koga couldn’t reach the level he needed, he could still hone his skills. Their plan was for him to achieve rank-up through merciless training.

Alma crossed her arms and shook her head. “Hm... I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“But why? I require your assistance.”

“Well...” An ominous light flickered in her eyes. “I’ll kill him.”

A malice so pure emanated from her that it made Hugo’s hair stand on end. He was overcome with a powerful urge to protect himself, which he struggled to smother. Her grin was simply wicked.

“I can’t understand it. Why do you hold such enmity for him?”

“Because he makes me mad.”

“I know the two of you are like oil and water, but—”

Before he could finish, Alma cut him off. “He doesn’t piss you off?”

Hugo tilted his head. “Me?”

Alma nodded. “You heard what he said at the meeting, didn’t you? He made it sound like only he cared about Noel—like the rest of us want Noel to keel over or something.”

“I know what you’re trying to say, but there’s no way Koga meant it like that.”

“You don’t know. Look, he had me stomping mad. That’s it. Just because he has a reason, that doesn’t mean he gets to say whatever the hell he wants. Am I right?”

Hugo didn’t know how to respond. Perhaps it was true that Koga hadn’t thought of the rest of them when he’d had his outburst. Nobody actually wanted Noel to die; they simply put his wishes first. If there were a way for them to avoid putting Noel in danger, everyone would have jumped on it.

“I never liked him even from the start,” Alma muttered. “But I still considered him a partner. I made that decision. Thought maybe he’d grow on me. But right now, all he’s thinking about is himself.”

“You’re wrong, Alma. Koga is putting Noel first. That’s why he hasn’t considered us. You can understand that much, can’t you?”

“I can, and that’s why I want him to know his place. So he’s got potential, big deal. That’s all it is—potential. He doesn’t have the actual strength to back it up. He’s so full of himself, and now we have to help him get better? Spoon-fed much?”

Hugo could only chuckle. He knew there was no convincing her. “You’re so harsh,” he said. “Okay, do as you like. I won’t rat you out to Noel.”

“Thanks. And by the way, how about helping me with my training?”

Hugo shook his head. “I couldn’t give you what you want,” he replied. “You need someone stronger than yourself, no?”

“You’re so modest, Hugo. You’re still a *little* stronger than I am.”

But how little was it really? She had only just reached A-Rank, but her abilities in battle already rivaled Hugo’s. All of it came down to her natural talent. Even Noel had to acknowledge that her abilities far surpassed Koga’s. And if Koga had the talent to someday reach EX-Rank, then Alma’s talent made EX-Rank

inevitable.

“Just a little further,” she said. “Then I’ll get to the deepest part of myself. Right now, if I fought a lord, or Zeke, or Johann, I’m confident I could give them a run for their money. Even winning wouldn’t be entirely impossible. Even if the chance was just one in a million, I’d find it.”

Alma leapt silently from the peak of the mountain. She placed a hand against its rocky surface and gave it a soft push.

“It doesn’t matter who the enemy is. I won’t lose. Not ever.”

With that, she turned and walked away. When she faded out of sight, the giant mountain she’d been sitting on crumbled to sand. It covered the surrounding environment, burying it to form a desert. Hugo sighed again as he took in his altered surroundings.

“Such a merciless thing, that talent...” he muttered.

He stood there with a wry grin on his face, then noticed that Koga had gotten to his feet.

“What’s all o’ this?” Koga asked.

The Longswordsman looked around in confusion, still wobbly on his feet after coming to.

“Looks like we’re in the desert stage now,” he said. “We’ll do our next round here. Any complaints?”

“Not a one. Come at me.”

Koga’s equipment had been fixed just like his body had been healed. It was the Puppeteer skill: *Repair*. It wasn’t perfect, but it was more than enough for the rest of their training.

“Prepare yourself, Koga. If you really want to get stronger, you are going to have to fight to the death.”

“Bring it!”

Koga’s sword glimmered as it collided with Hugo’s puppet soldiers. The battles would only get harder from here, but they would sharpen the

passionate blade of Koga's resolve.

The day to publicly announce the tournament had arrived. All the preparations for the press conference had been completed at the hotel's event space, and it was jam-packed with reporters.

Caius and I occupied a dressing room as we waited for the press conference to officially begin. Aside from the two of us, Caius's security detail took up positions both inside and outside the room. They were all on a completely different level than the soldiers I'd encountered at the palace. One man caught my eye—he had brown skin and wore a robe with a standing collar. I could tell just by the way he held himself that he was incredibly strong.

"I see you've upped the level of your security detail considerably," I said. "Your Highness, do you still not trust me? There's no need to fear me. I don't bite."

I flashed a sarcastic smile, and Caius frowned in response.

"Words I can't trust in the slightest," he replied. "I believe in you. It's why I've put my support behind your tournament. That said, I still don't *trust* you."

"You're a wary one. I thought you'd be more boisterous after you forced me into this position, but that's clearly not the case. Impressive."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about." Caius feigned ignorance and sipped his cup of tea. "You're a noble now. Perhaps you should spend less time on your schemes and more on your governance."

"There's no need to worry about that. I've left the lands you gave me in very capable hands."

Few nobles in this era managed their lands directly. Most lived in the imperial capital after hiring someone else to govern their territory. In the vivacious capital, they could be a part of the social scene, connect with business partners on a deeper level, plan new ventures, and focus on investing in their main line of work. None of them wanted to be stuck in the countryside while the world passed them by. I'd taken a page out of their book and left my lands in the hands of a specialty management business.

“I considered selling it, but I had a change of heart. You went through the trouble of gifting it to me, and I couldn’t go giving it away to a nobody in quite the same fashion.”

Caius’s face twitched in annoyance, but he said nothing. He turned away and kept his mouth shut. I had nothing more I had to share with him. I still held a grudge against him for trapping me the way he had, but it was nothing worth exacting vengeance for. I sipped my tea and glanced at the man in the white robes.

Who is he?

I had to have heard about him somewhere. He was too powerful to ignore. At first, nothing came to mind, but then I realized I probably *did* have information about him, in a way. The man was imperial security, and he was strong enough for me to be instinctively on my guard.

“The Society of Assassins is about to undergo a transformation. Instead of an independent, secret organization, we will be rebuilt to serve at the pleasure of the emperor. The new Society of Assassins will focus on intelligence gathering, and we will channel all resources into protecting the nation.”

I remember now.

By putting together what Alma had told me with my current circumstances, I deduced the man’s identity. I was sure of it now: this man was the leader of the Society of Assassins.

“It seems manpower shortages are hitting every industry,” I said. “The truly talented are being put to work on tasks outside their wheelhouses, but we’ll hit our limits before long. As a man in government, you must feel the same, no?”

The prince tensed up for a second, and though the leader of the Society of Assassin’s remained emotionless, his gaze fell upon Caius to see how he would react. That was all I needed—my deduction had been correct.

“Listen, you—” Caius began just as a knock came at the dressing room door.

“Your Highness, please get ready. It’s time.”

It was Caius’s butler, here to inform us that the press conference was about

to start.

“Understood. That means you too.”

Caius urged me toward the door, and we walked out to the press conference surrounded by security. The prince leaned down as we walked and spoke low enough that only I could hear him.

“You are as cunning as they come.”

“And so dependable.”

“Hmph. One would hope so.”

The grin on his face betrayed some level of satisfaction.

“Ladies and gentlemen, first and foremost I’d like to thank you all for coming here today,” Caius said, standing at the dais. “As was already mentioned in the documents you received earlier, today’s press conference is for a most important announcement.”

The press area was buzzing with excitement and tension.

“As all of you well know, the empire faces an approaching crisis—the arrival of the Valiant. They are expected to be here in roughly six months’ time, and it is our job to make the necessary preparations to defend our citizens. The empire is powerful, and the Seekers working with us are, of course, exceptional. I promise you now that we *will* protect you.”

He paused for a moment, then raised his voice as he continued.

“However, with such a threat looming over us all, allaying your fears completely is no simple task. And that is why, to encourage you all and inspire hope, we have decided to host a historical first. Here to provide you with the particulars is the originator and greatest benefactor of the project: Noel Stollen, clan master of Wild Tempest and third-tier clan master of the regalia.”

I stood up to face the crowd.

“The project has three goals. One, to inspire hope in the empire’s citizenry through a display of Seeker strength. Two, for our Seekers to prepare for the

approaching battle. And three, to discern the most suitable commander for leading our forces into battle against the Valiant. It is with the achievement of these three goals in mind that we proceed with preparations. And so it gives me great pleasure to announce this endeavor, publicly and officially, to all of you gathered here today.”

At that, the energy in the room peaked. Everyone hung on to my every word, waiting for what I would say next. Not wishing to disappoint them, I gave my announcement a confident, booming strength.

“I hereby announce the Seven Star Cup, a gladiatorial tournament to decide the Velnant Empire’s most powerful Seeker!”

Chapter 2:

The Creed of Fools

WITHIN THREE DAYS of the press conference, we received more than sixty clan applications for the Seven Star Cup, not including the regalia clans. It was an incredible outcome. There were a total of seventy-two clans in the Velnant Empire. Though I had always known that the regalia would take part, even I hadn't predicted such an enthusiastic response from the empire's other clans.

Though the regalia and other top-class clans could arrange their schedules around the tournament, this was not nearly as easy for regular clans. After all, the real job of Seekers was to eliminate beasts—they received assignments from the Seekers Association and spent their days and nights in battle.

Even so, the vast majority of clans had already declared their intent to compete. They all knew the importance of the Seven Star Cup. According to the intelligence reports from my information brokers—aside from Loki, who was still in the Republic of Rodania—the clans who had still not applied would do so in due time. It was a wise decision. Everyone knew the Seven Star Cup was a huge opportunity.

However, if every single clan in the empire put its efforts into the upcoming tournament, beast elimination rates would decrease. This would not be an issue early on, as the regalia and other top-class clans would handle the high-level beasts, and lower-level beast assignments could be outsourced to Seeker parties who had yet to form clans. The problem lay with the middle area.

In response to this, Wild Tempest informed the Seekers Association that it would handle these assignments. My organizational responsibilities left me unable to participate, which limited the ones we could handle. In this sense, our offer to the Association was an attempt to help out where we could.

To complete all of the assignments, Wild Tempest would be traveling all across the empire. Fortunately, we had a particular set of “wings” to help with that.

We met at the airship terminal on the outskirts of the empire. Among the line of airships was a beautifully sleek and streamlined ship with proud black wings. It sat under the light of the morning sun with a divine magnificence.

“The ship is called the Black Odile. We’ve had it repaired and improved since it belonged to Lorelai, when it was called the White Odette. It’s fifty-two meters in length, with a top speed of Mach 2. Maximum capacity is two hundred passengers. It’s fully equipped with battle equipment and a barrier system. Just like any other airship, it eats up fuel like a fish drinks water, but it’s furnished with all the most cutting-edge airship technology to date.”

The rest of Wild Tempest oohed and aahed, their eyes glimmering with awe.

“It’s amazing. Such a beautiful ship...” said Alma.

Leon nodded. “Black base with gold lining. Equipped with weapons and yet nothing unsightly about it—superbly streamlined. It’s the perfect airship. You handled the improvements, Hugo?”

Hugo nodded. He looked extremely satisfied.

“Yes. Noel asked me to. The White Odette was already a gorgeous ship, so I worried a little about losing what made it special, but it turned out great. I’ve no complaints.”

“Oi, look over there!” Koga said, pointing. “Under the bow, at the bottom of the ship. It’s our clan symbol!”

He was beside himself with excitement over the golden winged snake drawn upon the ship. I wanted everyone who saw it from the ground to know who it belonged to.

Leon gazed at the vessel questioningly. “But for someone to just *give* us a ship like this... I almost fear we’ll wind up paying for it in one way or another.”

I chuckled. “Relax. It’s just a sign of how desperate the prince actually is. With Johann gone, the only person he can rely on against neighboring rivalries is me. If I fail, he’s the one who suffers most.”

“That’s all well and good, but *this* is the problem at hand,” Leon said, smacking me in the chest with a sheaf of documents. “I’ve checked out the

specifications for the ship, and it's a real princess, all right. She's a needy one, and greedy for gold at that. Even putting together all the depth-5 and depth-8 assignments we just picked up, we're still running at a deficit. Our accountant is fuming. The only way we're going to earn a profit on this thing is if we use it to fight a beast above an abyssal depth of 10."

Beasts with the power of flight powered all airships. They were melted down into a liquid, which was crystalized through a special process and used as fuel for the vehicles' uniquely crafted engines. This was what made airships capable of such astounding maneuverability. Unfortunately, that crystal energy source was very, very expensive.

"We'll just have to run at a deficit, then," I replied. "Our debt to the Association takes priority."

The tournament preparations required such a huge monetary investment that the once-abundant funds of Wild Tempest had sunk down the bottom of the barrel. Yet with the Valiant attack on the horizon, playing it safe was foolish. The empire's biggest threat was also our biggest opportunity, and anyone who wasn't willing to stake everything they owned on it couldn't possibly call themselves the strongest Seeker.

"That's it, then. Leon, you're in charge of the rest."

I would not be leaving with the party on this expedition. I had tasks of my own to see to, and I could not afford to be away from Etrai.

"If anything comes up, contact me via the airship radio," I added.

"Got it. I'll take care of everything. I'll also help with Koga's training where possible."

"No need to overdo it. Even if Koga can't make A-Rank, it won't impact our plans."

"The plan isn't everything, you know?"

I let out a groan.

Leon chuckled and turned his gaze to the Black Odile. "All right everyone, let's get to it! No time like the present!"

At his order, the party boarded the Black Odile. For a brief moment, Koga lingered at the entrance hatch, looking at me. Our eyes met. We said nothing because there was nothing more to be said. Our results would speak for us. He turned away and disappeared into the airship.

Not long afterward, the engines fired up, and the airship sped down the runway with a roar. It took off on pitch-black wings, and despite its size, it looked light as a feather. I watched it soar higher into the sky, where it picked up speed and easily broke the sound barrier. I laughed as the wind pushed against me, messing up my hair.

“Hope none of you get airsick and spew on my new airship,” I muttered.

Upon returning to the clan house office, I had intelligence to attend to—and that included my information brokers’ reports. It was paramount that foreign agents and anti-nationalists didn’t get mixed up in the tournament. I needed to know everything about every participant: their Seeker record, their ideologies, their religious views, birthplace, parentage, and even their current relationships.

I was the man responsible for the entire tournament. Even the slightest mistake would not be tolerated.

As I pored over the documents, I found no problems with any of the competitors. For now, I could safely say that everyone was in the clear. That wasn’t to say I could rest on my laurels. There was still reason to believe that foreign agents might take a competitor’s family or friends hostage on the eve of the tournament, compelling them to take part in a potentially destructive plot.

Even if everything looked safe now, we couldn’t afford to let our guard down. I had to keep my information brokers going, hunting for anything out of the ordinary until the day of the tournament. Fortunately, I had secured people to help from the Barzini family—they were keeping an eye on competitors based on intel they received from my brokers.

The Barzini family members were everywhere—in brothels, restaurants, barbers, hospitals, tailors, and so on. They were woven into the fabric of everyday life. If a competitor did anything suspicious or unusual, it would not

escape my net.

Once I was done reviewing all the information, I took to reviewing the tournament rules. There was no particular problem with them as they stood, and they captured the essence of the tournament. Also, by limiting competitors to two skills only, we achieved two goals—first, we had a chance to see a competitor’s ability to adapt and observe, and second, we stopped foreign agents from acquiring full breakdowns of our Seekers and their skills. The competitors were in favor of the rules so far, and though we had set up a temporary office for people to bring complaints and questions, so far we had received none.

There *were* many questions regarding the extent to which the rules would be enforced. The most common of these was whether it was possible for us to detect illegal buffs or boosting skills *before* their match.

Thankfully, it was possible to know if such skills had been activated. We simply had to measure the mana density in a competitor’s body. If they were using a skill, their density level would be high, and there was no known skill or item to hide this. While some classes—like mine—had skills that didn’t consume any mana, the user’s mana density still went up, so that testing before matches would flush out any foul play.

Cheating was actually quite difficult. Competitors weren’t the only ones who’d be at the colosseum; there would be plenty of spectators, many of whom were bound to be Seekers themselves. Only the tournament management—excluding me, as a competitor—knew what skills each participating Seeker had selected, but any Seeker worth their salt would easily be able to see when a skill was in use. Someone in the crowd was bound to notice any overt attempts at cheating.

Be that as it may, if management did nothing to assuage the present concerns, it would only lead to mistrust between competitors, so a section of the rules was revised to allow for each competitor to select a cornerman.

Each cornerman was given the right to make two objections: one before the match and one afterward. To avoid the abuse of these rights, objections were not permitted *during* a match. In the event that an objection resulted in the

discovery of foul play, the offending competitor would be disqualified.

I knew this would lead to another question: what would happen if a cornerman was unable to see or recognize foul play? This particular matter came down to the competitors themselves and could be ignored for the most part. The Seven Star Cup would decide the strongest Seeker in the empire—it was each competitor's responsibility to make sure they had a talented and trustworthy cornerman. No excuses would be permitted.

In the name of fairness, all new decisions regarding the rules had to be sent via mail directly to every clan, including those who had yet to confirm their participation. I scribbled a note down just as there came a knock on the door.

"Master Noel?" ventured the voice from the other side. It was my secretary.

I called out to make my presence known, and the door opened.

"Apologies for the disturbance," the secretary said, putting a number of envelopes on my desk. "Some letters have arrived for you."

"I'll look at them soon. I also have a number of letters that need to be sent out, so it'll be on you to handle them. Here's a note as to what to write and where to send them," I said, passing it over.

"Understood. Consider it done."

I thought that would be the end of it, but the secretary remained, looking at me with something of an awkward expression.

"What is it?" I asked. "Something on your mind?"

"Er, one more letter has arrived addressed to you personally."

"Then hurry up and give it to me."

"Yes, sir."

My secretary slid the envelope from under their arm and put it in front of me. I tilted my head as I took it in hand, then let out a sigh as I recognized the contents.

"This again, huh?"

"Yes, again... I knew who it was from the moment I saw the return address..."

The envelope contained a letter and a framed photo. It was sent by Ralph Golding, a Wild Tempest sponsor and well-known merchant in the empire. He managed a number of businesses including trading securities, air transportation, and research into the applications of beast-material technologies. He was a veritable giant of the business world, and he'd written me to offer his daughter's hand in marriage.

"This is the fifth time."

Since I founded Wild Tempest, these letters were quite common—in short, they were attempts at strategic marriages. In the empire, close relationships with the heavily promoted Seekers was a status symbol, sponsorships included. There were also business perks, such as the ability to buy beast materials at wholesale prices. These were both reasons for nobles and merchants to sponsor Seekers. Naturally, the number of these sponsors skyrocketed when it came to bigger clans, with the *crème de la crème* being the regalia. And one way for a sponsor to separate themselves from the crowd was to have their children marry Seekers.

Our clan had received its fair share of marriage proposals until now, but we had refused them all. Marriages like these caused more trouble than they were worth. Knowing that a flat refusal was bad for appearances, we once forced Koga to accept one. For better or for worse, the other side had then refused *us*—it seemed that their sights had been set on me.

Most of the senders wanted me, the most powerful member of the clan. Next in line was Leon. Neither of us had an interest in such marriages and summarily refused them. Nobody wanted to rock the boat, so the proposals stopped once we politely declined.

That is, unless they came from Ralph Golding.

"The old man is nothing if not persistent," I muttered.

Ever since I had met him at a party celebrating our defeat of a lord, Ralph had been obsessed with me. He was hellbent on finding a way for me to marry his beloved daughter. He hadn't forced the issue yet, but I was beginning to tire of him sending me pictures of her even after we turned him away.

"Master Noel, if I may be so bold as to make a suggestion," said the secretary

after a moment's hesitation. "Perhaps it might be worth accepting this proposal?"

"Huh? You think I've got time for that?"

"Ralph Golding is a most valuable sponsor. I worry as to what may happen if we continue to refuse him."

"We've got other sponsors."

"I realize that, but considering tournament arrangements and beast assignments, our clan funds are near rock bottom. Proceeds from the tournament are set to be split with the Barzini family, and given that our own profits will be prize money for the victors, we're making almost nothing."

The Seven Star Cup was a tournament with monetary rewards, which we'd already announced—the victor received thirty billion fil, second place twenty billion, and the two third-place semifinalists five billion. Sixty billion fil in all, right out of Wild Tempest's pocket.

"The proceeds from our railway investment will not pay off for some time," said the secretary. "So there's perhaps no harm in indulging Golding's whims."

Not a bad idea. I had no interest in getting married, but I could take the proposal and date Golding's daughter for a time. This alone would help protect the man's honor. I also had a feeling it would encourage him to invest a little more in our plans.

If it were simply a matter of perseverance, there was always the option of approaching a bank about a loan, but that would put us in a different predicament: the general public would know we didn't have any money. When a big clan was concerned, such information would be all too easy to dig up, and I couldn't afford to show *any* signs of weakness—not with the tournament set to open and the position of supreme commander on the horizon.

"Fine," I said. "I'll do it."

"Huh? Really?" The secretary was wide-eyed with shock.

I nodded. "Send Golding a reply when you handle the other letters I talked to you about."

“Y-yes, sir! I’ll get on it right away!”

I watched as the secretary scurried out of the room, then lit up a cigarette to calm my frayed nerves. I sucked in the smoke and looked down at the photograph on my desk.

“Such a gloomy-looking girl.”

His daughter was by no means ugly. She had fragile, delicate features and a bewitching charm in her eyes, which were the color of the night sky. Her silvery-blue hair was like silk, and she exuded an aura of nobility.

But the more I looked at the photo, the more I sensed a certain melancholy in it. The girl was smiling, but it was only skin-deep. Her impression wasn’t cold—it was dark. Maybe I thought so because the women around me tended to be fierce and powerful. In any case, I wasn’t exactly enthused by what I saw.

“What was her name again?” I thought aloud, looking once more at Ralph’s letter. “There it is. Bernadetta Golding.”

Human stupidity had no limits. These creatures were smarter than any other living beings, yet they repeated the same mistakes on a path toward self-destruction. The human world was one of babies—giant babies feeding upon one another in Hell.

“Truly remarkable.”

The well-dressed man uttered the words as he gazed at a basement shrine with an atrium somewhere in the imperial capital. He and two others on the second floor looked down at the ceremony that took place in the darkness below.

The ceremony was attended by some fifty men and women, all of them in strange attire. They wore animal pelts that crowned their heads and nothing more. A primitive drum beat pounded out a steady rhythm, echoing through the shrine as the attendees lewdly and openly indulged in one other. The drugs they’d taken had them in a trance, and they no longer knew if they were human or monster.

On the altar of the shrine was the object of their faith. It was an unusual sight, to be sure: its upper body was a winged woman, its lower body a strange mess of tentacles. In front of the statue was a stone table, upon which lay a nude girl. She faced the ceiling, her eyes unfocused and distant. She muttered something unintelligible from the depths of a trance. A man in a goat's mask with a knife of obsidian stood beside the altar.

"God of the Netherworld!" he shouted as he raised the blade high. "Accept this sacrifice!"

The man let his blade drop square in her chest. The girl made no attempts to resist, and blood spurted from her mouth as the strike took her life. She spasmed on the altar like a fish out of water.

The man in the goat's mask pulled his knife free and blood sprayed from the wound, covering him in red. He then plunged the knife in again, gouging open the girl's chest and digging out her heart. When he placed the organ respectfully at the statue's feet, the gathered crowd grew excited and their voices rose up in deranged cheers.

It was a ceremony for fanatics of the God of the Netherworld, and it had just reached its peak.

"Quite the show, wouldn't you say?"

The voice belonged to one of the three figures watching the ominous ceremony from above. She was a bewitching young woman with a cold smile. She looked glamorous in a revealing, eastern-style dress. Foxlike ears poked out from the top of her head, proof that she was a hybrid beast.

"The Netherworld Faith is a gaggle of fools who worship the Void's high-level beasts, thinking them the true gods. The faithful are idiots, yes, but they're obedient to the founder and they have no fear of death."

"Remarkable. It is exactly what we were looking for," said the man excitedly. "They've said you are the empire's best broker and mediator. It appears they were right. We have a deal, Reisen."

The young woman named Reisen nodded, satisfied. "The founder of the Netherworld Faith and I are on friendly terms. They're all antiestablishment,

and so long as the price is right, they'll follow even the orders of Rodanian agents like yourself. Leave the negotiations to me."

Her conversational partner, the Rodanian spy, had been dispatched to the empire to clean up after his predecessor's failure and continue his intelligence work in the imperial capital. His newest orders had come in just a few days ago.

"I would appreciate that," the man replied. "The Netherworld Faith is essential to our plans. My goal is to assassinate a particular VIP visiting the empire for the Seven Star Cup, and the faithful will come in handy. I'm counting on you. Failure is not an option."

"Worry not. They will assist you when you put your plan into action."

Reisen turned her gaze to the third person standing with them, a strange figure wrapped in black. The darkness of her robe covered her eyes, making her expression impossible to read. In the underworld, she was known as the Lord of Flies, a handyman of sorts who took on any job, no matter the danger. Among Scavengers, none were as exceptional—or dangerous.

"Expect great things, Rodanian," the Lord of Flies said with a chuckle. "Your wishes will come true."

"I've heard so much about you," the agent replied, nodding. "And I feel much more confident knowing the Lord of Flies is on our side. Let me share with you my plans in their totality, then..."

And so the trio discussed their plans as a ghastly ritual took place below. After the Rodanian agent left, Reisen and the Lord of Flies watched the ceremony come to an end. Now that the grotesque celebrations were over, the faithful fell into exhausted slumber.

"He appears to believe us completely, Malebolge," said the Lord of Flies derisively.

Malebolge—for that was Reisen's real name—laughed in delight. Reisen the broker was merely a disguise she used to blend in. She was actually Malebolge the Chaotic, an enemy of humanity and one of the Valiants.

"He'd never imagine, not even in his wildest dreams, that you are in fact a beast."

Malebolge shrugged. “It was a team effort. That agent carries himself like a gentleman, but behind that facade is a merciless killer. When he’s done with his work, he intends to snuff us out. He will not want to leave any loose ends. He’s *exactly* the reason I despise the Rodanians.”

“That makes two of us. We will simply have to take his life before he takes ours.”

“Oh, we won’t need to do that ourselves. We’ll leave it to Etrai’s Seekers. We’ll do as we always do—watch from on high and wait for our perfect opportunity.”

“Are you sure? Goat Dinner’s Dolly Gardner finds you extremely suspicious. One false move and she may get a lead on you.”

Dolly and Malebolge had met before. Dolly only knew her as Reisen the broker, but her Seeker instincts told her there was more to it. She’d gone as far as hiring an information broker of her own to dig into Reisen’s identity. Malebolge had been able to maintain her veil of secrecy so far, but it was only a matter of time before her identity was revealed.

“After all the work you put into the Netherworld Faith,” said the Lord of Flies, “it would be a shame for it to come to nothing.”

Malebolge was directing the Netherworld Faith from behind the scenes. She had gathered the disgruntled and the dissatisfied, readying them for a day when they would wreak immense havoc and destruction. Though the majority of its members were simply faithful believers who didn’t know the truth, the religion’s executives were all activists plotting the downfall of the Dufort dynasty. They had multiple branches outside this one, all devoted to working in the shadows.

“That won’t happen,” Malebolge said calmly. “We will use Goat Dinner’s investigation against them, and they will find themselves confronting our Rodanian friend. The Seekers will most certainly emerge victorious, but the Rodanian is stronger than he looks. We merely need to launch a sneak attack while the clan is attempting to recover from the battle.”

“You think that’s possible? Goat Dinner *is* a member of the regalia.”

“We don’t need to win. We only need to weaken them to the point that they can no longer chase us. They will stop the investigation of their own accord. Goat Dinner’s lofty position on the regalia is also a restraint—if they cannot maintain their unity, another clan will usurp them. We can expect them to remain docile while they put themselves back together. Plus,” added Malebolge, her lips turning up in a wicked grin, “there is the matter of the venomous snake on the regalia. He is one we cannot underestimate.”

“Venomous snake... You mean Noel Stollen.”

Noel and his clan, Wild Tempest, were the newest members of the regalia, and he had earned that position by burying his predecessor, Johann. Noel was one of the empire’s most violent and aggressive Seekers. If one showed even a sliver of weakness, he pounced on it. He was every bit the sort of enemy that required extreme caution.

“What if Dolly and Noel join forces?” asked the Lord of Flies. “They are both alike in their aggressive approaches. They will accomplish their goals by any means necessary.”

“Such a partnership is impossible. Noel is too busy with the Seven Star Cup. He doesn’t have the bandwidth to aid Dolly. Even if she were to ask for his help, he would refuse her. Just as he did the first time.”

“Are you sure you are not taking them lightly? If Dolly uncovers your identity, Noel will most likely lend her his aid. You *are* one of the Valiants, after all.”

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Malebolge lightly. “I have the luxury of an eternity. Unlike you, I can start over right from the very beginning if I have to.”

The Lord of Flies let out a low groan, and Malebolge laughed.

“Don’t be like that. I’m taking this very seriously. We will use the Seven Star Cup to inflict serious damage and crush the empire’s leadership. On the day of judgment, we will be victorious. The snake and the goat are mere trifles.”

“I hope that’s true...”

“It is *you* who should tread carefully. You’re the one with ties to the snake, not me. His fangs are vengeful and obsessive. It’s possible he’ll turn them on

you.”

The Lord of Flies remained silent. She remembered it all so well. Noel had hoped to make use of Andreas Hooger, the CEO of Hooger Commerce, and she had assassinated the man right before his very eyes.

“The day of reckoning approaches,” said Malebolge. “Neither of us can afford any errors.”

The Lord of Flies nodded. “Yes. The day the world fractures is before us. We must see to it, no matter the sacrifices.”

Everything is for humanity’s salvation, she thought, her resolve renewed.

“I must go. Contact me if anything happens.”

No sooner were the words spoken than the Lord of Flies transformed into countless tiny insects, revealing that the figure had been little more than a familiar—a replicant—controlled from afar. The flock of flies disappeared from the shrine like a black mist.

When all the flies had disappeared, a man in a white coat appeared without a sound at Malebolge’s back. “How long do you intend to use that for?”

“Until it breaks,” answered Malebolge tonelessly.

The man’s expression filled with enmity. He was Empireo, the Soul of the Samurai. “I will always hate you.”

“Empireo, you know I’m not here to make a fan out of you.”

“Then I don’t need you to pretend otherwise. When all this is over, I swear I’ll kill you.”

His words overflowed with his urge to end her on the spot, but he disappeared just as he came—without a sound, without a single trace.

“You swear you’ll kill me, hmm?” said Malebolge in a singsong voice. “Such wonderful words.”

Her eyes darkened like evening twilight.

When Bernadetta cut off the connection to her familiar, a sharp pain stabbed

through her heart. She raised herself from her bed with a groan, the pain so intense that she thought she might faint. She put her hands to her delicate chest and took deep breaths. Though she slowly felt a little more at ease, the fatigue was overwhelming and nearly unbearable. She lay back down and waited until she felt better.

It never used to be like this. Though she expended magical energy to use her skills, she had never been brought to the point of her body refusing her own instructions. Such a thing would've once seemed preposterous.

Johann was the cause of her suffering. With his attack, he had maimed her very soul. Fortunately, the actual wound was not especially deep, and Malebolge had helped heal it, but it left a deep scar that would never disappear. As a consequence, when the girl used her skills for long periods of time, she experienced severe pain.

Most common among her symptoms were sheer agony that pulsed through her entire body and loss of consciousness. If she used her skills for even longer, she ran the risk of organ malfunction and perhaps even death. At present, she could use her skills for about an hour at most.

The girl had told Malebolge none of this. In fact, she had lied and said she was fully healed. If the beast knew of her actual state, there was every chance she would be killed—discarded as no longer useful. Though she and Malebolge were in a partnership of sorts, she still did not trust the beast in the slightest. Malebolge was a true monster, and the girl had more than a few suspicions of her own.

Be that as it may, Malebolge's help was essential, and the girl could not cut off their connection just yet. Still, at some point they would inevitably try to kill one another—this much was fact. She had to make plans for disposing of Malebolge. She was all too aware of just how fearsome the beast was as an enemy and how difficult she would be to kill. The girl had decided to do whatever it took because she had to kill Malebolge completely and utterly.

"I can't do it alone," she whispered in her empty room. "I will need help."

Although she had a general gameplan, she needed a partner to enact it. This was especially true now, given the state of her body. She was running out of

time, and if she could not make moves with the time she had left, all her efforts until now would be for naught.

She slumped back into the softness of her canopy bed and let thoughts swirl as she listened to the rain tapping at the window. As it grew stronger, she raised herself up, frustrated by the constant noise, and then she heard it: the neighing of horses. A carriage had stopped in front of the house, where a person emerged from it.

“He’s home...”

The girl listened as the front door opened and the servants went to greet the master of the house. She could not go to sleep yet, not now. The girl put a blanket over her pajamas, stepped into the slippers sitting neatly at the foot of her bed, and left her room. From there, she went down the stairs and to the front door, where a middle-aged man was passing his soaking-wet coat to one of the attendants. He turned to her with a smile.

“Why, hello there, Bernadetta.”

“Welcome home, Father.”

Her father, Ralph Golding, had made it home. “It’s raining cats and dogs out there,” he said. “I am so very glad I made it home early.”

“As am I. If the roads flooded, you might have been in an accident.”

He nodded and gestured to the dining room. “Dinner is ready, I hear. Shall we?”

“Yes. It’s been a long time since we last ate together.”

“I apologize,” said Ralph. “I’ve been so caught up in work.”

Bernadetta giggled. “No need to apologize. I’m quite patient, and I’m sure you prepared a wonderful present to make up for it.”

Ralph chuckled in response. It was kind, pleasant laughter. “You drive a hard bargain. I should expect nothing less of my own daughter. Your mother is also very proud of you from her place in heaven.”

Bernadetta’s mother had died of illness when she was still a child. Though she had many relatives, Ralph was her only remaining direct relative.

“Actually, I *do* have a present for you.”

“Is that so? From here you appear empty-handed, Father.”

Her face lit up with curiosity. Ralph’s smile was one of hidden meaning.

“It’s not here with me,” he said. “But I’m sure you will love it.”

Soon after, Bernadetta sat down to dine with her father, and the servants brought out their meals. It had been some time since they ate alone together, and conversation was easy.

“Are you feeling better, Bernadetta?”

“Yes,” she replied, nodding. “Much better. The doctor said I’m on the mend.”

The damage from Johann had been so great that Bernadetta had been bedridden for some time. She had suffered for days, but now she’d finally been able to leave her bed. The fundamental damage to her soul would never heal, but Ralph knew nothing of this. Nor was he privy to what his daughter got up to behind his back.

“I was so worried when you fell ill, but you do seem to be doing a lot better,” he said with a relieved smile. He took a sip of wine. “That reminds me: it’s your birthday next month.”

“Yes. I turn twenty.”

“Twenty already. Time certainly flies! The little princess I could pick up in one arm has blossomed into a delightful and beautiful young lady.” There was a note of awe in his voice. “Then again, I’m seeing some changes too—more white hair every day.”

Ralph straightened up in his seat before going on.

“Darling, there’s something important I’d like to talk to you about. You’ve been of marriageable age for five years now. Would you consider an engagement?”

Bernadetta looked at her father, not quite understanding what he meant. Ralph had always been overprotective, and he rarely even let a man within arm’s length of her. At social gatherings, business associates naturally approached Ralph about potential marriage discussions, but he refused them

all.

According to her father, he was intent on finding her a suitable partner himself. Being that he had also turned down proposals from influential noble families, Bernadetta had always assumed that this was an excuse—something a father said because he did not want to let go of his only daughter. At least, until now.

Here he was, sitting before her and asking her seriously if she would consider an engagement. This could only mean one thing: he really *had* found someone he deemed suitable for her hand.

“This is all very sudden,” she told him. “Are you telling me your present is a potential partner?”

“Exactly that. And I am certain that you will be overjoyed when you hear his name.”

Ralph was overflowing with confidence. The man in question had to be someone especially big—famous, rich, influential, or all of the above. Ralph never would have been so excited otherwise. Bernadetta felt a flicker of annoyance in her heart. She already knew that this would make it more difficult to eventually turn the offer down.

Ralph was a kind father, but his one-track mind had propelled him up the ladder of the financial world at a young age. He had an iron will. When he decided to do something, he saw it through no matter what. Even if Bernadetta were to attempt to reject his offer, he would not back down unless she had a reason he could accept.

Therefore, it was mostly pointless for Bernadetta to resist and much less trouble if she simply accepted it. She could meet with her new partner to explain that they were a bad match, and Ralph would simply have to acquiesce. She felt a little guilty for stringing her father along, but it was clear to her that it was the best way.

“He must be quite the gentleman for you to speak of him with such zeal,” said Bernadetta. “In that case, I will accept.”

“Fantastic! I’m delighted that we can move things along so quickly!”

“But just who *is* this man you’ve found for me?”

Bernadetta sipped her wine. Her throat was parched, perhaps due to her exhaustion. Or maybe it was the guilt she felt for deceiving her father.

Ralph had no idea who Bernadetta really was. His face lit up with a great big smile. “It is none other than Noel Stollen, clan master of Wild Tempest and newest member of the regalia.”

The moment she heard Noel’s name, Bernadetta spat out her wine in a fine mist. She choked on it and launched into a coughing fit.

“My dear! Are you quite all right?!” Ralph asked worriedly.

Bernadetta nodded, still coughing. “Y-yes, Father...”

“I understand. This must be too much for you to bear in your recovery. Perhaps we should talk about it another day.”

“No, I’m fine! Please, do go on!”

She raised her voice and urged her father to continue. The snake as a potential marriage partner? What in the world was happening? It was all so sudden, and Bernadetta simply could not wrap her head around it. One thing was clear: if she left matters in her father’s hands, they would quickly proceed beyond her reach. She needed to understand the situation so she could decide how to respond.

“Well, if you insist,” said Ralph, his brow still furrowed. “There are many reasons why I selected Noel Stollen as your partner. In short, he is indispensable to the future of the Velnant Empire. Why, just after the announcement that the Valiant was coming, he held a symposium and showed everyone his unique brilliance. He made it clear that he did not intend to lose even to the empire’s biggest clans. I’m sure you’re aware of what happened next.”

“He exposed corruption in the justice department and proved Hugo Coppélia’s innocence.”

“That he did. He didn’t just force the influential to act, he also overturned a ruling of the state. And at his age! This is not something most can even hope to aim for, let alone achieve. One has to assume that he was preparing for that

moment for a long, long time. He has made use of the Valiant encroachment to create great opportunities and see them through. He is calculating, he takes initiative, and most of all, he knows an opportunity when he sees one.”

Ralph’s voice was filled with passion, his eyes glimmering like an excited young boy’s.

“Since then, Noel has only continued to grow by leaps and bounds, and his clan even defeated a beast lord. His efforts have earned them a position on the regalia too. He is truly, *truly* a remarkable young man.”

“But he is also a Seeker. Is he capable of inheriting your business, Father?”

“A man like Noel is capable of anything he sets his mind to. In researching his past, I discovered that he managed a winery before becoming a Seeker. That winery also happened to make a tidy profit. Although his suitability is certainly a matter of concern, I have no intention of forcing him into the role of my successor. Noel is already a success, and he likely has little interest in inheriting another’s rank or position. I believe this to be well and good.”

Ralph gulped down some wine and took a crumpled piece of paper from his jacket pocket.

“Do you understand what this is, Bernadetta?”

“I do not,” she said, shaking her head. “What is it?”

“This is called a bill. It’s paper currency.”

Bernadetta had heard the word before. Bills differed from coins in that they held no actual value but served as a government-recognized currency for economic exchange. They were more convenient to store and transfer than coins, and unlike gold, silver, and bronze—which were all limited resources—they could be printed and issued much more easily, which in turn boosted spending and spurred on the economy.

“I am hoping that the empire transitions from the metallic currency of coins to paper currency. It is best for the revitalization of our economy. Coins are inconvenient, you see, both for the country and its citizens.”

“Is the empire going to start printing these paper bills?”

“No. This particular bill was not issued by the imperial government. This bill was issued by the former free cities of Mönch.”

“Mönch...”

It was the name of a place that, some ten years ago, had been decimated by one of the Valiants: Cocytus the Silverfish. As the nation had been absorbed into the greater Velnant Empire, its name was seldom on anyone’s lips these days.

“The free cities of Mönch were well ahead of the times when it came to finance and economics. That they were able to implement paper currency before any other nation is proof of many long years of wisdom, experience, and trust. In fact, Mönch’s paper currency was even set to be recognized as an international currency by neighboring countries. However...” Ralph sneered. “As you already know from your history studies, Mönch was razed before it ever had the chance to officially print its paper currency. Perhaps it is inappropriate of me to say, but we were fortunate that it was destroyed before that could happen. Every country dealing with Mönch would have taken a huge financial hit otherwise for the simple fact that the currency was not metallic but paper. If the country printing the currency is destroyed, their currency becomes utterly worthless—no better than tissues. Trash, essentially.”

It made sense enough. Bills were made a currency by the nation that printed and issued them. It was not the bills themselves that people used in their dealings—rather, it was the trust of the nation that issued them. If a nation did not have that trust, then its bills would fail to become currency.

“Ever since then, there has been a complete lack of international trust in bills. Nobody wants to use them for their deals when there is a chance they might become little more than colorful slips of paper. It’s quite the dilemma. Every nation, in truth, wants to move toward a paper currency, but none can forget the tragedy of the free cities of Mönch.”

Bernadetta nodded, then tilted her head quizzically. “I understand what you’re saying about bills, but what does that have to do with me?”

“Well, you see, I believe that people and bills are alike,” said Ralph.

“Really?”

“Yes, very much so. Neither has any intrinsic value. The value of a person, like that of bills, comes from outside themselves in the form of trust.” He had a faraway look in his eyes as he continued, “The world calls me a finance giant. And there is no doubting my results—with sales of twenty trillion fil per year, I am worthy of such a moniker. I am very proud of what I have achieved. Yet it is also true that I have achieved nothing outside of making money. After all, I barely even know where my socks are.”

Bernadetta giggled. “You are a remarkable man, Father. No need to humble yourself so.”

“I merely speak the truth, Bernadetta. My worth as a person is perhaps only my position as father to a most wonderful daughter,” said Ralph with a kind smile. Then his face regained its seriousness. “Truth be told, my value is that of the empire itself. Even if the Seekers are successful in fighting off the Valiant, nobody can say what will happen to our nation afterward. I have thought long and hard about how much I want my precious daughter to be with a powerful man who does not falter, no matter the situation.”

“And that man is Noel Stollen?”

“I can think of nobody else. He is admittedly on the short side, and he is also younger than yourself, but this does not mar the fact that he has truly exceptional talent. He also happens to have a most handsome face.”

“Is the face so important?”

“Well, it is my dream to dote on my adorable grandchildren,” Ralph joked with a wink.

“I see,” she replied with a soft laugh. “I will do my very best.”

Behind her smile, she was thinking, *This could be my chance!*

No doubt the snake had his eyes on one thing: Ralph’s money. Why else would someone so cold-blooded enter marriage talks? But if money was what he was after, it meant she could use the snake as an accomplice in her efforts to take down Malebolge. The marriage proposal was thus a chance to get close to Noel without raising Malebolge’s suspicions.

The snake was strong and cunning. Bernadetta knew that even better than

her own father, who praised him for those reasons. He had killed Johann, which meant he might also be capable of taking down Malebolge.

“I must admit, I’m so glad Noel had a change of heart,” said Ralph.

That got Bernadetta’s attention. “Whatever do you mean?”

“He turned down my offers of marriage talks four times. Then, all of a sudden, he contacts me saying that he’d like to reconsider. I’m glad I never gave up.”

“Ah... I see.”

A shiver ran down her spine. Her father was so enamored with the snake that he prattled on and on about him, but Bernadetta was no longer listening.

He refused four times? But why? And why the sudden change of heart?

Bernadetta had at first assumed that the snake was simply after money, but this new information seemed to point toward him having other motives. Why would he backtrack on his refusal otherwise?

Perhaps it came down to the cost of the Seven Star Cup and the clan’s worsening financial situation, but Bernadetta felt it was dangerous to assume that was all there was to it. The snake was not the type of man to change his mind about something he had decided just because he was enduring managerial difficulties. Even if he was hurting for money, he would not just enter into marriage talks with a wealthy man’s daughter—he would take precautions to ensure that his affairs went unnoticed by those around him.

“Darling, are you quite all right? You’ve gone pale.”

Bernadetta snapped back to reality at the sound of her father’s worried voice.

“You’re not well, are you? Please, go to your room and get some rest. We can talk more about the proposal at a later date. Preparations need to be made on both sides, anyway.”

“Yes, Father.”

Shaking a little, she stood and returned to her room. Along the way, her thoughts whirled with the mystery of the snake’s motivations. But the more she thought about it, the more she simply could not believe that his only objective was money.

Is it possible that he knows I am actually the Lord of Flies?

If that was the case, then everything else clicked into place.

The individual everyone knew as the Lord of Flies was actually Bernadetta's familiar. For this reason, she had been able to conceal her real identity while working in the underworld. But she was not always going to be able to hide who she really was. If one traced the magical energy from Bernadetta's familiar to its source, they could deduce that she was the one in control. It was by no means an easy thing to do, but it was still possible.

If the snake had gone to the effort of uncovering Bernadetta's real identity, that was proof enough that he planned to kill her. After all, the snake was crazy enough to sacrifice his own life span to crush his enemies, and he did so without a lick of hesitation. Now he was coming for her.

At the mere thought of it, Bernadetta was so afraid that she broke into a cold sweat. It covered her body, and she felt her heart turn to ice. She did not fear death. What she feared was that, upon being captured by the snake, an interrogation *far worse* than death awaited her. The snake was merciless in dealing with his enemies, and he would use any means to achieve his goals—including bombing a jail.

"His fangs are vengeful and obsessive. It's possible he'll turn them on you."

Malebolge's words rang in Bernadetta's head. The snake was strong and cunning, yes, but he was also cruel and persistent. If he set his sights on you, there was no escape.

Bernadetta wondered if she should explain things to Malebolge and ask for her assistance but eventually decided against it. The beast lord would only scorn her fear and criticize the girl's inability to solve her own problems. Then Malebolge would abandon her, perhaps even kill her. And if Bernadetta's suspicions toward Malebolge were correct, asking for help was a pointless endeavor—the creature could not be trusted.

"I have to do it myself," Bernadetta muttered as she climbed the stairs to her room. "I have to kill the snake before he kills me."

The fear in her voice was gone, and in its place was a clear and pervading

bloodlust.

It had been approximately six months since Wild Tempest killed the lord called the “Noble Blood.” The battle had taken place in the former principality of Archillio, and Wild Tempest had succeeded marvelously in stopping the monster. In the aftermath of that battle, the ruined cityscape had been entirely leveled, becoming a clear, barren plot of land. It was here, in this once-prosperous location, that new blood was about to be spilled.

In the furthest depths of the gaping Abyss, the humans and beasts faced off.

On one side was an army of elemental soldiers, led by a depth-12 beast lord—another Noble Blood. This beast was different than the Noble Blood that Wild Tempest had killed. Although it was, statistically speaking, common for beasts of the same type to manifest from the same Abyss, it was rare for another lord to appear in such a short time frame.

This new Noble Blood appeared to be a beautiful young girl with exquisite silver hair wearing a gorgeous dress. It sat with its legs crossed in an extravagant chair floating above the ground. Its army of more than three hundred elemental soldiers stood below it in formation, awaiting its command.

A group of Seekers assigned to bring the beast down opposed it: four A-Rank Seekers, twenty B-Rank Seekers, and three C-Rank Seekers. Every single one of them was tough and battle-tested. Even then, it was not enough to bring down the Noble Blood. At best, they could only take out the elemental soldiers that stood before them.

The Seekers knew this already. The Association had already informed them that this Noble Blood was far stronger than the last. Killing it would require at least two times the fighting power they currently had. If they fought, they would lose, so they were locked in a stalemate.

“Like frogs, frozen in the glare of a snake,” said the Noble Blood, its shapely lips curling into a cruel grin. “You know you cannot win, yet you brazenly approach all the same. Do not tell me you came here thinking that negotiation was a possibility?”

In response to the Noble Blood's arrogant faux-politeness, the black-haired Karura leading the Seekers clicked her tongue.

"Damn thing isn't showing us a lick of respect," she spat.

The Karura's name was Sumika Clare. She was vice-master of Pandemonium and commander of the Seeker forces. Sumika reached for the sword at her waist. She was a Longswordsman, an A-Rank Sword Specialist who hailed from Thunderhand Island, a nation in the far east. At the mere drawing of her sword, she could activate countless battle abilities and skills inherent to Karuras. Even then, Sumika could not see a gap through which to strike at the Noble Blood before her.

"I tire of this staring contest," said the Noble Blood. "Please, die for me already."

The beast shot them a disdainful grin, then pointed at Sumika and her Seekers as if it were conducting an orchestra. The elemental soldiers beneath it sprang to life.

"They're coming!" shouted Sumika. "Everyone, prepare for battle!"

The Seekers readied their weapons. Everything was going according to plan. The Noble Blood had underestimated Sumika's forces and left the battle entirely to her elemental soldiers. Its precognition wouldn't help it here—even if the beast *could* see the future, it was only a few seconds ahead. And if it wasn't ready for battle, it would be slow to react. The Noble Blood was clearly overly confident in its advantage.

But there was one thing the Noble Blood didn't know—the strongest man in the empire was a part of Pandemonium. His name was Leo Odin, the King Slayer.

Pandemonium's plan of attack was simple. Sumika and her Seeker forces were decoys—their job was to buy time for Leo to leap out of hiding and strike a killing blow on the Noble Blood while it was off guard. They may have been facing a lord, but Leo was EX-Rank; there was no doubt he could kill it. Still, the Noble Blood had the ability to stop time, so their plan was to slay it before it could.

If Pandemonium would've had enough manpower to kill a lord without Leo, they could have set a powerful barrier in advance. Then they could've blocked attacks even when time was stopped and then taken the lord down when it ran out of magic. Presently, however, Pandemonium just weren't that strong.

As long as things went according to plan, Leo would sneak up behind the Noble Blood and kill it in one fell swoop while Sumika and her Seekers were in battle with the Lord's elemental soldiers.

However, Sumika's well-laid plans fell to pieces before they could come to fruition.

"What the hell?!"

Her shocked cry rang out just as Pandemonium was about to meet the Noble Blood's elemental soldiers. Before they could, a lone figure plummeted from the sky and landed between them: a man with a head of golden hair. He wore leather armor that left his arms bare, showing off the rippling muscle adorned with crimson tattoos. His face was covered by a mask made to resemble a lion.



“Leo?! What’s the meaning of this?!”

It was Leo Edin, clan master and King Slayer himself—the empire’s most powerful Seeker.

Leo was supposed to be in hiding, yet he had appeared right in front of the Noble Blood. Sumika’s shock spread like a wave through her Seekers, who were suddenly hesitant. Even the Noble Blood was wide-eyed with surprise.

“Is this an ambush? What use is that if you show yourself first?” asked the Noble Blood, laughing. “Oh, how I detest idiots. You will die with the others.”

The elemental soldiers flooded to Leo’s position. He was completely outnumbered. By the time Pandemonium’s Seekers moved to help, it was already too late—the elemental soldiers had reached him. A collision with forces of this level would leave even an A-Rank Seeker helpless, their life ending in a torrent of blood.

But Leo was EX-Rank. He made no sound and bore no shadow as he launched countless punches at a blinding speed. In an instant, all of the elemental soldiers were decimated.

All that remained in the aftermath was complete and utter silence.

There had been more than three hundred elemental soldiers, each being somewhere between depth-8 and depth-10. All of them had been obliterated, their remains drifting to the ground like snow.

Not a person alive could follow Leo’s attacks with their eyes. Even the Noble Blood, who could see the future, could only catch his movements in fragments; it couldn’t grasp his attacks in their totality. He was so fast that nobody could read his punches. They were the ultimate weapon: flawless, free-flowing, and refined. If Leo were to launch these weapons at the Noble Blood, it would not be able to avoid them. Not even if it used its ability to read the future.

“I-Impossible...”

A cold sweat trickled down the Noble Blood’s cheek. It was a proud beast even if it wasn’t a Valiant, and it was overwhelmingly strong among those in the void. Yet now it distinctly felt fear gnawing at its insides.

“You will—”

“You can stop time, right?” Leo asked, cutting the Noble Blood off. He spoke calmly and easily. Even with the mask blocking his voice, it reached the beast’s ears. “Intriguing. Do it.”

Not a single person on the battlefield could believe what they had just heard.

The Noble Blood could use all magic and freeze time. Because it cost so much magical energy, the beast could not use its other powers while time was stopped, but it could use all manner of other attacks. This made it incredibly powerful. Outside of catching the Noble Blood off guard or using powerful barriers to block its attacks, there was no way to counter such power.

Even then, Leo had casually asked for it, like a person requesting a song at a party. “*Do it*,” he’d said. The Seekers around him recoiled in despair, and the Noble Blood clenched its teeth as its humiliation warped into a seething rage that brought tears to its eyes.

“You filthy insect!” it howled, voice thick with anger and indignation. “I will have your head!”

As it said the words, the Noble Blood’s body transformed. Batlike wings sprouted from its back, and two curled horns grew from its head. Its once-dainty right arm expanded, growing thick and knotty like a tree. The rest of it was still the little girl from before, but the horrific contrast of its different parts brought to mind a chimera.

The Noble Blood’s transformation was a technique that entailed combining the best possible parts. Unlike the Noble Blood that had faced Wild Tempest—which had simply revealed its true power by growing bigger—*this* Noble Blood had perfected each of its transformed parts. As a result, its overwhelming true power far surpassed its predecessor and boosted its physical abilities enormously. They were the same Noble Bloods, but they were on entirely different levels—this one was ten times more powerful.

“You will not speak once I’ve reduced you to a heap of organs!”

Even though it boasted incredible strength, the Noble Blood was not so proud as to ignore its most powerful weapon. It drew upon its vast magical energy to

rewrite the rules of the very world and stopped time. Then, while everything was frozen, the lord swung its gnarled right arm at Leo. It was an attack that would transform the shape of the earth upon impact, and Leo stopped it easily with his left hand.

“What?! But how?!”

It was unbelievable. Impossible. Time had been stopped. The only thing that could move through this space was the Noble Blood. How had Leo broken that rule?

“Your time magic works by using two techniques at the same time,” muttered Leo, still holding the Noble Blood’s arm. “First, you have a power that stops time. Second, you have a power that lets you move during that spell. More accurately, that power works by making you immune to your own time magic. I can read it in your magical energy. But what this means is, anyone with the same magical energy can also move through this paused time.”

“The same as me?! How?!”

“I have the power of a War God.”

War God was the EX-Rank specialization of a Fighter class. Leo was capable of feats that far surpassed the limits of a Fighter’s abilities. One such skill was the War God’s *Natural Wonder*, which brought the caster’s magical wavelength in sync with their opponent’s, negating magical attacks and defenses.

“Looks like your time-stopping magic is a dud,” Leo said. “Got something else for me?”

The Noble Blood was at a total loss. The ability to stop time was its safety net, and it hadn’t worked. Leo’s physical abilities also overwhelmed its own—no matter how much it struggled, it was unable to wrench its arm free from his grasp.

“C-curse you...” The beast’s face went pale as it realized it was breathing its last breaths. The battle was over.

“So you can read the future, but you couldn’t see this coming? Oh, I see. You *can’t* do that while you’re stopping time. You don’t know what’s going to happen when time is frozen. You can only see the future when time is moving.

Wow, I didn't expect your skill to be...such a letdown."

Leo let out a sigh, then readied his fist.

"I am God's divine judgment," he said. "Through mercy and prayer, I hope that you reach salvation in this purification."

It was over in a single blow. Leo's divine fist essentially shattered the Noble Blood in an instant, its blue blood and flesh and bones and organs falling like rain upon the War God.

With the Noble Blood dead, time resumed and the Abyss was purified. The red mist cleared, revealing blue-gray clouds in the sky above.

"Did... Did we win?"

Pandemonium's members looked around in a daze, but there was no joy on their faces. All were rooted to the spot by fear as they stared at Leo, who was drenched in the blood of the beast he had just slaughtered. He turned to the Seekers and, without so much as a word, walked past them. Those in his way squealed and scurried aside. They were all terrified.

"W-wait! Leo!"

Only Sumika, Pandemonium's vice-master, shouted at Leo to stop him. He continued to walk, leaving her clicking her tongue in frustration.

"All of you, back to the airship," she ordered. "I have to talk to the idiot."

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Sumika made it clear her orders were paramount, and the Seekers nodded. She ran over to Leo but, as expected, he made no attempt to respond.

"I told you to wait!" Her patience had run dry, and she grabbed Leo by the shoulder.

"What do you want?"

His eyes were endlessly dark and cold. It sent a shiver of fear through Sumika, but she quickly pushed it away and stood in front of Leo, glaring at him.

"Why did you ignore my plan?"

Leo sneered behind his mask. "Because I deemed it unnecessary. I was fine on

my own.”

“That’s only because hindsight is fifty-fifty! What if you’d lost?! Every single one of us would have been slaughtered in that single frozen moment!”

“And if that happened, it would be no concern of mine,” Leo said icily.

“You son of a bitch! What do you even think we are?!”

“Nobodies. I don’t bother you, so don’t bother me. As long as we can agree on that, then I am happy to lead all you weaklings.”

“Leo, you—!”

Just as Sumika was about to punch Leo in the face, a sharp voice stopped her.

“Enough! Stop right there!”

A young girl was running toward them in a long tailcoat, her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. It was Marion Jenkins, an inspector for the Seekers Association and Pandemonium’s coordinator. She had been in charge of perimeter security during the battle, and she had come as a mediator. Sumika let her fist drop to her side.

“I don’t know what happened,” said Marion, stepping between them, “but you’re partners. Act like it. We’ve confirmed that the beast is dead. I’ll handle the rest.” She glanced at Sumika with some worry in her eyes.

“In that case, I’m done here,” Leo said. The War God walked in the opposite direction from Pandemonium’s airship.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Marion asked. “Airship’s *that* way.”

“That’s not your business.”

“Except that it *is* my business. You’re Pandemonium’s clan master. As an inspector, I have to know where you and your clan are, and it’s my job to make sure you’re responsible. Let me ask you again. You’re covered in blood, and you’re essentially abandoning your clan—where are you going?”

Marion’s words were stern, and Leo let out a sigh.

“A bath. I need to wash this blood off, so I’m going to a nearby town to take a bath.”

“Are you *trying* to piss me off?” Ferocity flickered in her eyes as she glared daggers at Leo. “Fine, then. Let’s say you’re screwing with me. Whatever. But don’t forget—if you and your lot are underestimating the empire, then I will make sure you know your place.”

“Is that a threat?” Leo asked, turning to sneer at Marion. “You can talk as much smack as you like, but you’re the ones who will pay for it.”

“If that’s what you think, then get this through your thick skull: you kill me here and relations between the Seeker Association and your Holy Cross Church are severed completely. Is that what you want?”

“Look at you, a little dog hiding behind your organization so you can bark up a storm.”

“I don’t have to take that from a bat-brained idiot who won’t pick a side. Nobody’s denying you’re the strongest, Leo. But how long are you going to play this dumb fence-sitting game? Is that why you’re always abandoning your fellow clan members? Because you feel guilty that you’re working for the church?”

Leo did, in fact, work for the Holy Cross Church, the largest religious organization in the Velnant Empire. The church had a large number of Seeker adherents, but Leo was no mere follower. He was an agent for the pope’s militant group, Mistletoe.

Mistletoe’s duty was to infiltrate countries and expand the church’s power through shows of military strength. And just like the mistletoe plant—a parasite that flourished and fed on much larger trees—the group had worked its way into the heart of many nations worldwide.

Leo becoming a Seeker was for the sake of fulfilling his duties, but the only people who knew this were Marion, Sumika, and a few members of the Association. Although the Association knew Leo’s true identity, they still couldn’t let him go—a tacit admission that his unique strength was still useful. Marion also held Leo’s fighting abilities in high regard, but she had no intention of abandoning her responsibilities.

“I won’t ask you what kind of position you’re in or whether you’re just a lapdog for the church. Whatever the reason is, you *chose* to be a clan master,

and you *will* shoulder the responsibilities that come with it. You will trust your clanmates and fight alongside them.”

Leo turned his back to Marion as she admonished him. The unspoken message was clear: *I don't care.*

“Are you waiting for a worthy enemy before you start to take this seriously?”

He didn't reply to her question either.

“Don't get conceited!” Marion shouted as Leo walked away. “No matter how strong you get, there will always be someone above you!”

At that, Leo stopped in his tracks. “You mean the Valiant? I'll be there for that battle, so you don't have to worry.”

“I'm not talking about the Valiant.”

“Oh? Supreme Dragon, then?”

“No. I'm talking about Noel Stollen.”

Leo turned around, his hands on his stomach as his laughter echoed into the air. He didn't even try to hide it.

“Are you trying to make me laugh myself to death? The *swindler*? He's cunning, I'll give him that. Smart too—it was a brilliant move, setting up that farce of a tournament. But what of him? I promise I'd turn him into minced meat in the space of a second.”

Leo continued to cackle derisively, but Marion didn't even flinch.

“Then let me ask you this,” she said. “Could you do what he has done?”

“I'm not a swindler, so your question's pointless.”

“Don't play that game with me. If you can't do it, just admit it.”

The rage hidden behind his mask bubbled to the surface.

“You are the strongest, Leo,” said Marion, “but Noel sits above you. It doesn't matter how strong you get. You'll never beat him.”

“You're all bark, pup. Talk is cheap.”

“Indeed.” Marion shot him a belligerent grin. “But words won't be enough at

the Seven Star Cup.”

She walked up to Leo, took an envelope from her jacket pocket, and passed it to him.

“From Noel.”

Leo reluctantly opened the envelope and read the letter inside. It was impossible to discern his feelings from his expression, but after a time, a chuckle rumbled inside his mask.

“Uh-huh... Fine. I’ll enter the Seven Star Cup.”

Sumika gawked in surprise at the clan master’s declaration. “You’re going to enter? You literally just said it was a farce...”

The decision of whether Pandemonium would enter the tournament was left to Sumika, but from the very beginning, Leo had said he would not compete, calling it a sham. She did not know what had inspired this change of heart, but she could feel Leo’s fighting spirit—a resonant madness dripping from every fiber of his being.

“I apologize for bringing you out all this way,” Zeke said with a chuckle.

He was topless, his sword and shirt by his side. We stood at the peak of a steep stone mountain. It had taken an hour on horseback to get here from the capital.

It was midday and the skies were clear. There was no snow, but the winds were still cold enough to feel like blades. It was ridiculous for Zeke to be hanging out in these extreme conditions without a shirt on.

All the same, I was a busy man, and I didn’t like that he’d called me out to this remote place by owl post. The gusts were too strong for me to even smoke a cigarette.

“Idiot,” I snapped. “Learn to choose better meeting places. Are you insane?”

Zeke laughed off my insults. “Sorry. You’ve been here before, so I thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“It was summer back then. We’re in the middle of winter right now.”

The wind was chilly back then, even, but nothing like this. On top of that, the air was so thin up here. It was the worst. Maybe it was a fantastic spot for intensive training, but one wrong move and your eyelids would be frozen shut. The tiny particles of ice that sparkled in the air around us were all formed from the moisture in our breath. I guessed it was about minus thirty degrees.

“It’s freezing here, damn it. My bangs turned into icicles.”

“For someone complaining so much, you’re dressed pretty light.”

Zeke had taken note of the fact that I was dressed no differently than usual. I didn’t own any hiking gear, and I’d come to the mountain peak as I was. My coat, woven with a black dragon’s myocardial fibers, helped ward off some of the chill.

“My grandpa made me tough,” I said. “It’s cold, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“Same as me, then. Back when I was a kid, that old demon hag had me training in extreme conditions like this all the time. Thanks to her, environmental changes don’t faze me.”

“Old demon hag... Sharon Valentine, right?”

Sharon was a renowned elven woman, formerly the second-in-command of Supreme Dragon but now its number three. She’d seen something in Zeke when he was just a troublemaker in the countryside, and she’d put him through a grueling training regimen.

In other words, Sharon was Zeke’s teacher. He wasn’t her only student, though. She had picked up talented children from across the empire and developed a training system—a kind of elite Seeker education program. The results made her famous. She’d successfully trained a huge number of Seekers up to A-Rank, and she was instrumental in Supreme Dragon’s reputation as the empire’s strongest clan.

Though the general public put the spotlight on Supreme Dragon’s EX-Rankers—Victor and Zeke—the clan’s key player was, without a doubt, Sharon Valentine. That was how advanced and exceptional a teacher she was. Even my

mentor, Overdeath, had used her writings as a textbook for teaching me modern Seeker theory.

“Though I may currently be the strongest Seeker of my generation, Sharon Valentine is easily the best trainer. When you decide you want to truly deepen your knowledge of Seekers, you would be wise to make her your next instructor. If I write a letter of introduction for you, she will not turn you away.”

In the end, I had instead chosen the path of strengthening myself through battle, so I had never gone to Sharon for training, but my grandfather had spoken the truth. Even now, as the clan master of Wild Tempest, I based the fundamentals of my strategies on her tactical manuals.

Even Leon, who had gone through the training academy system, and Hugo, who had learned Seeker techniques through self-study, had been strongly influenced by Sharon. Excluding rare cases such as the foreign-born Koga and Alma—who had been trained in seclusion in the mountains—there probably wasn’t a Seeker in the empire who hadn’t been impacted by Sharon Valentine in some way. Some even called her “Mother Seeker.”

“I’d love to sit down and talk about Seekers with her someday,” I said.

“It’d be in your best interest not to,” Zeke told me, tensing up a little. “She hates you. You’d have a gun pointed at your skull before you could even utter the word ‘discussion.’ Not even joking.”

“What a pity.”

I’d never met Sharon, but I figured she probably hated me. I was the type of guy to eliminate anyone as soon as I deemed them a problem, no matter who they were. As a leading Seeker, Sharon valued authority and character. We were anything *but* compatible. What I did at the regalia meeting was bound to make its way to her. It was no surprise to hear that she detested me.

“It’s your one weak spot.” Zeke smiled. “You are a tremendous Seeker. You have the kind of prodigious skills that only come ‘round once in a lifetime. That’s how you’ve accomplished as much as you have at your age. But you’re so aggressive that you’ve made yourself a lot of enemies. And you can’t wallop them all into submission; some will rise right along with you.”

As I listened to Zeke, four people rose to mind: Lloyd, Tanya, Walter, and Chelsea.

“There’s a limit to how strong anyone can get on their own. We surpass our own limits by way of growing together—not unlike what you just said about wanting to talk about Seekers with Sharon. Because of the way you fight, those opportunities are like dust in the wind. That’s a fatal weakness for a person.”

He wasn’t wrong, but it was still advice to sneer at.

“I don’t think my way of doing things is a *weakness*,” I replied. “Even if I don’t cozy up with other people, I can still have rivals. Didn’t you just prove that yourself?”

“Hm. Well, there’s no denying that.”

Zeke had opened the door to new powers through his battle with Johann. All of the injuries he’d sustained were now healed, and he was brimming with a more determined spirit than ever before.

“That battle was wonderful,” he thought aloud. Then he turned to me with some annoyance. “That is, until *someone* got in the way.”

I chuckled. “You know that was my fight. I don’t know how Leon convinced you, but you have no right to complain. Your fight is with someone different, and you know it. Stop it with the flings and affairs, playboy.”

“That stings,” Zeke said, tugging on his coat. “Anyway, let’s get down to it. The reason I called you here is exactly that. Leo *is* competing in the Seven Star Cup, isn’t he?”

“Yes. I just received confirmation.”

That took him by surprise. “Wow, that’s incredible. What kind of underhanded means did you have to use to achieve that?”

“Don’t make it sound so scandalous. I just sent him a letter of encouragement.”

“Encouragement, eh?” Zeke parroted.

I nodded. “I told him that if he didn’t compete, I’d make sure the whole empire knows what a coward he is. Not long after, his coordinator sent me a

reply—he's in."

Zeke gave me a dubious look. "That's it?"

"The guy is overwhelmingly powerful. I guarantee he looks down on me. Think about it. If you were him, it'd get on your nerves, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose..."

"But more than that, he needs to take me on as a matter of pride. So yeah, he's in. I've been on the receiving end of this kind of provocation, and it's not pleasant. I knew from the very start that it would work."

When Zero kidnapped Loki, he sent me a letter not unlike the one I sent Leo, and the memories were still fresh. Even though I knew I was being provoked, I simply couldn't ignore it.

"The stronger they are, the more they're bound by their pride. Denying them one means denying them the other. You could call it a kind of creed. This creed of ours is something that sets us apart from the weak. At the same time, it *is* our weak point."

Zeke nodded appreciatively. "Makes sense. You're a real shithead, though, you know that? Rotten to your heart and soul." Still, he couldn't help but grin. "But I guess that's exactly why I'm drawn to you."

He turned away from me.

"Thank you, Noel. For keeping your promise. I'm grateful."

"We've got a mutually beneficial relationship. No thanks necessary."

"All the same, I guess this is my own creed at work."

I could see the grin on his face over his shoulder.

"I do like that about you," I said with a smirk of my own.

"Thanks, but don't expect me to pull any punches at the Seven Star Cup. To be completely honest, I'm looking forward to the possibility of fighting you. I guess that's just how it is for playboys like myself."

Zeke's smile never broke, but there was a fierce fighting spirit burning in his eyes. I couldn't have been happier. Because the matchups in the finals would be

decided via lottery, I wouldn't get to choose who I fought. Some part of me yearned to face off against Zeke.

"Got it," I said. "And when that time comes, I won't hold back."

Against a guy like Zeke, I could unleash my full power. I was, at heart, a fool who couldn't stay true to the path of the strategist. It was imprudent pride—it was my creed.

"I'm leaving," I said, but I stopped mid-turn as a spark of mischief ran through me. "You know, you *are* a playboy, and there might not be a single woman in the empire who wouldn't throw herself at you. But I'm pretty popular myself."

"Oh, I know that already. Popular with the girls *and* the boys."

I flashed Zeke a confident grin. "I'm actually in marriage talks, even. I'm meeting with the prospective girl tomorrow, in fact."

"Good for you. Who's the lucky gal?"

"Ralph Golding's daughter, Bernadetta Golding."

"Wh-what?!"

Zeke's usually cool eyes nearly popped out of his head. This was exactly the face I'd wanted to see. I had done my research on Ralph, and it seemed he was very protective of his beloved daughter. So much so that he let neither man nor insect anywhere near her. What surprised me, however, was that one of the insects he had denied access was none other than Zeke himself.

He had approached Bernadetta at a party, and she had rejected his advances. Ralph had then issued an official complaint against Supreme Dragon. That incident alone had caused relations between Supreme Dragon and Ralph's related enterprises to go sour, and the financial damage was hefty. It wasn't hard to imagine that Zeke—who was the cause of it all—would have gotten an extremely stern talking-to from his clan.

"Bernadetta is meeting with you of all people?! You have *got* to be kidding me!"

"Think whatever you want," I said. I spun around at last and began walking down the mountain.

“Wait right there, Noel! We’re not done here!”

I heard his shouts, but I had no intention of stopping. I had gotten what I wanted: a chance to see Zeke look like an idiot. I wasn’t actually looking forward to tomorrow; the very idea of it depressed me. But right now, I couldn’t have been happier.

In her heart, Bernadetta felt not unlike the gray-blue clouds in the sky out the window. Today was the start of the marriage talks, and she was at a restaurant with her father, who owned the place. There with them was the man himself: Noel Stollen. They had the entire restaurant to themselves, so the spacious dining room was empty of guests save for the three of them. The immaculately groomed servers brought superb food and wine as Ralph and Noel spoke.

“So before becoming a Seeker, you managed a winery?” asked Ralph, who of course knew this fact but was eager to show interest in Noel.

“I did. I quickly handed the business off to someone more knowledgeable, but I enjoyed it. Even now that I’ve left, they still send me good wines whenever they produce them.”

Noel was dressed in a tailcoat, and he smiled brightly as he went on.

“I think the greatest takeaway from the experience was the bond I had with the people who worked the winery. That was the real treasure, and it’s not something money can buy.”

“I understand completely. There are those in society who see me as cold-hearted, but I too believe nothing is more important than the relationships people have with one another. May I just say I am so glad to have the opportunity to talk to you today.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I couldn’t be more grateful to speak so openly with a giant of the financial world.”

The two men went on with what was clearly a business discussion. There was nowhere for Bernadetta to join in. She was little more than a walking centerpiece merely present to dazzle. It was bad manners for a rich man’s daughter to interrupt him, yes, but she was also trying to calm her nerves,

which were frayed with fear and anxiety.

Noel was, in person, much more beautiful than she remembered having seen him through her insects. He also exuded endless ambition.

All people had status. Looks, physical prowess, intelligence, artistic sensibilities, charisma, morals, wealth, rank, power, lineage, connections, achievements—the list went on. A person's status gave them value, and that value distinguished the haves from the have-nots. The wall between the two was absolute. Equality did not exist.

Think of this quote from one of the poor: "Money isn't everything."

Now imagine the same quote coming from the wealthy: "Money isn't everything."

The exact same words, yet they carried entirely different weight.

Have-nots were not inherently evil. However, they were not trusted. They were not heartfelt; their words carried no weight. A person's status, in other words, was what gave them the power to force others to consent—a crystallization of their value.

Seen from this point of view, Ralph lost to the sixteen-year-old Noel in terms of status, even though he was revered as a tycoon. In terms of appearances, the boy made one think of the fleeting, transient beauty of a young girl, but he had an overwhelming presence and depth to him. It was as though he were completely and utterly flawless—likely due to all the great feats he had achieved—and yet how many people missed this about him?

Bernadetta had also faced her fair share of terrible experiences and fierce battles in the depths of the underworld, and even then, Noel terrified her. It was a fear that petrified her and made it impossible for her to make decisions. No matter how much she peered into his eyes and his smiling face, she simply could not see through to the truth.

She had absolutely no idea what this beautiful young man was thinking.

"Are you not feeling well?" Noel asked her.

Bernadetta snapped back to reality at the sound of worry in his voice. "I-I'm

fine.”

“You look quite pale. Maybe we should wrap things up and meet again at a later date.”

Ralph nodded at Noel’s suggestion. “I think it best we do just that. Forcing your way through a pleasant meal when you’re under the weather tends only to leave a bad impression. My apologies, Noel.”

“Think nothing of it. We all have days when we’re under the weather.”

“I’m grateful for your understanding. Let’s plan for another day, then. Perhaps you’d like to meet just the two of you, next time?”

“Very well. I’m unaccustomed to female company, but I would be happy to act as her escort.”

In response to Noel’s smile, Bernadetta mustered a vague nod.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Ralph said suddenly, rising from his chair.

At first, Bernadetta thought he was going off to attend some kind of business, but just as he was leaving the restaurant, he shot his daughter a wink. She understood then that he wanted her to talk with Noel in private before their “date” came to its conclusion.

Still, the girl was unsure what to do once Ralph was gone. Was it really possible that Noel had somehow ascertained her real identity? And if he had, why would he go to the trouble of accepting these marriage discussions? Her throat was bone-dry with nerves, and she sipped her wine before making up her mind and looking Noel in the eyes.

“May I ask you a question?” she ventured.

“As long as I can answer.”

“I heard from my father that you initially turned down his offers to meet me. What was it that gave you a change of heart?”

“Aha. That,” said Noel with a chuckle. “To be completely honest with you, it comes down to money. I am hoping to get further financial support from your father, which is why I took him up on it.”

Bernadetta was stumped by Noel's blunt response. It left her at a loss for words, but Noel pressed his fingertips together and went on.

"As I'm sure you're aware, I'm putting a lot of work into hosting the Seven Star Cup. It requires a huge amount of funds, and though I'm embarrassed to admit it, we could use some help. I thought I might approach your father about it."

"You are nothing if not honest," replied Bernadetta, still baffled. "Did you not think you might hurt my feelings? Few people, if any, would be happy to know they're being used for the sake of money."

Noel grinned and nodded. "You are correct, and I may have made things unpleasant for you. However, as I already have your father's understanding on the matter, I felt it was only a matter of time before the information reached your ears. In which case, I deemed it better for you to hear it from me first. Besides," he said, his eyes narrowing as he sized her up, "wouldn't it be true to say that you yourself aren't particularly excited about these marriage discussions?"

"That's not—" Bernadetta began, but she could not bring herself to finish.

She would've felt the same way even if her prospective partner had been someone other than Noel—Bernadetta had no desire to marry anyone at all. It was also inconceivable that she would marry an enemy. She had only agreed to entertain these talks because she wanted to get an idea of Noel's true intentions.

Noel's grin grew wider at Bernadetta's inability to deny his words. "No need to worry. Your father loves you, but that is no reason for him to ignore your feelings."

"My father fears that the coming of the Valiant will result in the collapse of society as we know it. He wants to set me up with someone powerful like yourself."

"I am happy to hear that your father puts such faith in me, but his fears are unfounded. So long as I am here, the empire's future is as good as completely assured."

Noel spoke the words matter-of-factly, and the light in his eyes gave her the impression that he would cut down anyone in his path. Bernadetta understood then that Noel really believed what he was saying. He was not bluffing in the slightest; he believed with his entire being that he would beat the Valiant. No, not believed—he *knew* it.

What truly scared her in that moment was that, even as his enemy, she still found him capable of following through. This young man sitting before her was actually more frightening than the coming destruction of the world. His force of will was that overpowering.

“Would you be interested in being my fake lover?” Noel asked.

“Your fake lover?”

Noel nodded. “Neither of us is actually interested in marriage, but I am no longer in a position to turn it down. Similarly, you can’t reject this arrangement right away for fear of harming your father’s reputation. How about we continue dating for a time?”

“To fool my father?”

“Lying is not always an act of betrayal against those you love. That said, if such an act offends you, it’s probably best we cancel things immediately.”

“Won’t you lose my father’s investment if I break things off here?”

“I have already received a down payment of one billion fil, and he’s promised an additional five billion if our relationship goes well. Should you choose not to cooperate, I will receive less in the way of investment, but entering into this discussion won’t have been a complete loss.”

“But why would you tell me that? You know that I’m in a difficult position. If you said nothing at all, you would still get your six billion fil...”

“Let’s be clear: if you don’t put an end to our marriage talks at some point, we will be wed. And neither of us wants that, correct?”

“Ah, I see,” said Bernadetta with a giggle. “Please give me a moment to consider your offer.”

She put her hand to her mouth in a show of concern, but the truth of the

matter was that she had no reason to turn down Noel's offer—she merely wanted to avoid any suspicion that might come from her answering too quickly.

Was he really just after money, or was there some other reason he had approached her? Bernadetta still didn't know for certain, so it was too early to cut things off. She wanted to draw as much information out of him as she could. In doing so, she could discern whether she could use him to help her kill Malebolge.

She could always kill him after that.

"Very well," said Bernadetta. "I will be your fake lover."

A farce though it was, Bernadetta and Noel became a couple.

The day after their first meeting, Noel contacted Bernadetta by owl post requesting a good day for them to meet a second time. He asked her to select a few open days in her schedule. After a handful more letters back and forth, they settled on a day for their first "date."

"If the snake is planning something, today's the day," muttered Bernadetta as she did her makeup at her vanity.

The face that looked back at her from the mirror was taut with stress. Her father had been with them the first time, but today she would be on her own. It was impossible for her to calm her nerves.

If Noel had worked out Bernadetta's true identity, he was going to do one of two things: use that information to extort her, or finish her off directly. But Bernadetta herself was more than prepared for battle. If Noel *did* try to attack her, she was not going down without a fight.

With her makeup done, Bernadetta gazed at her reflection.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Even if he is the snake, I will make things work."

She rose to her feet just as a corner of the room warped, opening a portal to elsewhere. A woman Bernadetta knew all too well emerged from within.

"Malebolge..."

The beast with her bewitching fox ears and Eastern-style dress wore a thin smile as she stepped into the room.

“Why are you here?” Bernadetta asked. “Didn’t I tell you my home is off-limits?”

Malebolge held up a newspaper. The front-page scoop was that Noel and Bernadetta had started dating.

“This is very intriguing, oh Lord of Flies,” she said pleasantly.

Bernadetta spat curses in her heart. She knew that she and Noel had become news. There was no avoiding it—he was a clan master in the regalia, and she was Ralph Golding’s daughter. However, the news broke far too quickly. It was possible that Ralph himself had leaked the information. No doubt he intended to put pressure on them in the hopes that it would secure their engagement.

“I never believed in my wildest dreams that you and the snake would fall in love.” Malebolge narrowed her eyes, watching Bernadetta carefully. “Why didn’t you tell me something so important? We’re supposed to be friends. Why are you being so cold?”

The fox-eared woman donned a pout, but Bernadetta smiled. “I didn’t think it was necessary,” she said.

“Hmph. Are you declaring war on us, then?”

The beast asked the question with complete calm, but she radiated threat. If Bernadetta made one wrong move here, she would find herself in a fight. And even if Reisen was a temporary vessel for Malebolge with only a fraction of her real power, she was nonetheless a formidable foe. If they fought here, Bernadetta would lose.

“Do not misunderstand me,” said Bernadetta, raising her hands in a show of surrender. “I am not taking a stance against you. These talks of marriage, this dating—it is part of my father’s agenda. I did not ask for it. It was an accident I could not have seen coming. Must I inform you whenever I encounter such a thing?”

“Your partner is the snake. Our enemy. I would think that informing us would be only natural, no?”

“It is *because* he is our enemy that I can use this opportunity to dig for information. You are doing the same behind my back, are you not? I don’t appreciate that only *I* am to be admonished for such actions. If you are going to criticize me, then shouldn’t you reveal what you’re hiding?”

Malebolge’s expression grew cold and hard. She exuded a pressure on par with roaring flames, but Bernadetta could feel that the scales in her heart were wavering, weighing the decision to kill her or to spare her. The scales tipped bit by bit—there was murder in Malebolge, and it was soon to spell her death.

Again, Bernadetta was sure to lose. She discreetly searched for potential exits. She felt as though she were walking a tightrope across a deep ravine, and as her heart fell into despair, she heard the clacking of hooves and the creaking of a carriage outside. Listening carefully, she heard footsteps pounding up the stairs.

There was a knock at the door, followed by an attendant’s voice. “Miss Bernadetta, Noel has arrived.”

Bernadetta answered slowly, her eyes still locked on Malebolge’s. “Very good. I will be down shortly, so please have him wait in the sitting room.”

“Understood. I will let him know.”

She didn’t relax, not even as the attendant ran back down the stairs. Her eyes locked with Malebolge’s until, suddenly, the pressure all around them dissipated.

“Fine. I will leave the matter of the snake to you,” Malebolge said before turning on her heel. “Remember this, Bernadetta: you are an outsider. No matter how far and wide you search, nobody will ever understand you like we do. You would be remiss to forget it.”

“I won’t.”

“Very good. And if I give you this freedom, you will not betray my expectations?”

Bernadetta nodded, and Malebolge left through the void. In an instant, all of the tension in the room vanished, and Bernadetta was racked by a sudden exhaustion. She put her hands on her dresser so as not to collapse and took deep breaths.

Malebolge had let her go this time, but there was now a clear fracture in their relationship. Even so, she felt this would have occurred even if she *had* told them of Noel. Although Bernadetta had prepared herself for such a moment, it had come much more quickly than she expected. That being the case, she needed someone to help her with Malebolge—now more than ever.

Once Bernadetta regained her composure, she straightened up and left her room. She went down the stairs and into the sitting room, where Noel was elegantly sipping some tea.

“I apologize for the wait,” she told him.

“Shall we be off, then?” asked Noel with a smile.

He stood and escorted Bernadetta out of the room. Her attendants watched her with their fists clenched, as if silently wishing her good luck on her first date. She forced a smile. How would they look at her if they knew the truth? Simply imagining the sight put her in a gloomy state of mind.

Their date for the day would start with lunch, followed by a popular theater performance in the imperial capital. Noel had reserved their table and acquired tickets to the show.

The restaurant Noel brought her to was a members-only establishment reserved for only the most influential. Because both Noel and Bernadetta were so well known in social circles, even those in the restaurant—who knew the etiquette of the rich and powerful—shot them curious glances. At the very least, they refrained from disturbing the couple’s meal. Had Noel and Bernadetta gone to a regular restaurant, they would have been mobbed.

“Why did you decide to become a Seeker?” Bernadetta asked as they ate.

Conversation had flowed much easier than she expected. They had started with light banter, then discussion of recent events, and progressed to their tastes in fashion and music. Things had gone well enough that Bernadetta felt comfortable asking a more personal question.

“I suppose the biggest reason is my admiration of my grandfather,” replied Noel, smiling. “He was a Seeker of great renown. I lost both my parents when I

was young, so he raised me. I suppose it was inevitable that the grandiose tales of his adventures became my bedtime stories. He is the reason I wanted to become a Seeker.”

“So your desire to be like your grandfather motivated you to succeed?”

“Looking up to him just kicked things off. My real motivation comes from a different feeling.”

“Is that so?”

“People look at Seekers as symbols of power. They’re feared for their strength. Seekers outstrip police officers, the military, and especially beasts. They show us glimpses of potential—of true human strength. I am no different. I attained the rank I have now through dogged pursuit of that strength. That’s not going to change. My pursuit of power *is* my motivation. I made a pledge to my grandfather in his dying moments that I would be the strongest Seeker ever.”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation or doubt in Noel’s words—they were clear and true.

“You are simple at heart, aren’t you?”

Bernadetta was likewise open with him. Noel really did live a life of simple purity in the pursuit of his goals. It was why he gave up more than half his life span to defeat Johann. There were no impurities in his way of life—his vision. And though Bernadetta opposed him, his essence was so clear it was almost beautiful—stunning as a bottomless ocean and equally frightening.

“I’m envious,” she admitted. “It must be so wonderful to live as you do.”

“Hm... I don’t know about that. I’m satisfied with how I live my life, but I hate being a perfectionist. Ah well, there’s nothing I can do about it. I am at its beck and call, and it’s gotten me into trouble too many times.”

“I would venture that there is no such thing as the perfect person.”

“I don’t disagree. I wax on about personal creeds and all, but it’s an obvious weak point of mine. Basically, I *hate* to lose. I believe it’s because of the trauma I suffered at a young age.”

“Trauma?” Bernadetta tilted her head, and Noel let an awkward grin rise to his face.

“The truth is,” he said, “I was often bullied as a boy.”

“You? Bullied?!”

The mere thought was preposterous. Here was a man for whom harassment and torture were mere hobbies, yet he was saying that he himself was once bullied? Bernadetta could not hide the shock in her eyes.

“Surprised, are you?” asked Noel.

“I-I am, yes. I had heard that among all the Seekers in the empire, you are easily one of the most aggressive... It’s hard to even imagine *you* being on the other end.”

“I suppose that made me what I am today. Yes, I’m more aggressive and merciless than others—and that’s because I myself have experienced cruelty. It made me want to become stronger and to develop a strength that no one could look down upon. I do not want to lose to *anyone*.”

After saying so, Noel chuckled sheepishly.

“Not a word to anyone about this story, please. I haven’t even shared this with my fellow clan members. It would be rather humiliating for it to be floating out in the open.”

“Oh, but of course. Why did you tell me about it, though?”

“Because I feel indebted somehow. We shoulder the same burden as partners in crime, deceiving your father.”

“Indebted?” Bernadetta couldn’t help but laugh. “Your deception will net you six billion fil, you realize? Please do not talk to me of debt with such honesty.”

His misguided honesty tickled her, and her laughter rang out through the restaurant.

“Is it really so funny?”

Bernadetta wiped at the tears in the corner of her eyes. “Yes, quite,” she said, nodding.

“I’m a little surprised by how easy it is to make you laugh.”

“It’s only because you’re such an eccentric.”

“Really? I don’t think so at all. Then again, it *is* my first time on a date with a woman, so perhaps it’s a case of nerves.”

The word “date” startled Bernadetta. She had almost forgotten that they were on one in the first place. Although they were faking their relationship, the fact that they were out on a date was undeniable. Noel had admitted that this was his first time on a date with the opposite sex, but Bernadetta was no different—it was her first time too.

“Your face has gone red,” said Noel. “Are you all right?”

Bernadetta’s voice rose sharply in pitch as she replied, “I-I’m fine!” She channeled her embarrassment into clearing her throat. “Speaking of dates, I’m four years older than you. That’s not an issue for you?”

“It’s neither here nor there. Especially considering our love is fake to begin with.”

“Ah, yes. Of course...” Bernadetta had slipped up. In her panic, she’d asked about their age gap. Thinking about such a thing with any sort of seriousness was stupid when this was all just a farce.

“Besides,” added Noel, “the difference is no longer *four* years. I turned seventeen yesterday.”

“Really? Well then, happy birthday.”

“Thank you.”

Noel smiled and looked at his watch.

“We should be heading to the theater. Let’s finish up.”

The theater performance was about a young prince who took up the crown when his father, the king, fell ill. It was a war story about facing off against an invasion plotted by a neighboring nation. Though it was dark and moody, the efforts of the young and intelligent prince and his loyal retainers was evocative

and exciting. The enemy king leading the invasion was no one-dimensional villain either. It was difficult to hate him outright—he was both a loving father and a patriot devoted to his country.

All of the actors were exceptional, as were the props and the stage direction, which made lavish use of cutting-edge technology. It was everything one could expect from the most popular show running in the imperial capital. Every seat in the house was full, the audience fully immersed. Bernadetta was no exception.

Only Noel, sitting by her side, had a different reaction. His eyes were closed, and short breaths of slumber could be heard from his nose. There was zero zeal to be found on his restful, sleeping face. Perhaps he was bored or tired—either way, he seemed happier in the world of his dreams.

Even when asleep, however, Noel left little in the way of openings for surprise attacks. As Bernadetta looked upon the childlike innocence of his slumbering form, she marveled at how comfortable she felt around him.

She thought about his behavior and realized that he might not actually know her real identity. Nobody would be crazy enough to fall asleep right in front of their enemy. Even if it *was* to catch her off guard, it was too inefficient. Besides, someone like Noel would be much more likely to come at her directly instead of doing things in such a roundabout fashion.

All of Bernadetta's worries had been in her imagination. It was just as she had first suspected—his sights were set on her father's money. Noel had no other motives. He wouldn't suspect her of being the Lord of Flies even in his wildest dreams. Relief flooded Bernadetta's heart.

She wondered how she could put Noel to use in her plan to kill Malebolge. Having them kill each other was simple—she merely needed to send Noel an anonymous tip revealing who Malebolge was. The problem was that there were still things Bernadetta needed Malebolge to do, and there was no point killing her before they were done. The best possible outcome was that the two killed each other. Noel would be just as much of a bother in the post-Valiant world as Malebolge was. The thought of it was far too dangerous. He had to die. Bernadetta had to work out a script for it all, just like the drama playing out

before her eyes.

At the end of the show, the theater erupted with applause as the audience rose to their feet for a standing ovation. Bernadetta joined in too. While clapping her hands, she noticed that Noel had woken up and was now sleepily applauding as well.

The story had ended with the prince's demise. He faced off against the enemy king only to make a fatal mistake—one that cost him his life. A tragedy if there ever was one. However, even in death, the prince had succeeded in quelling the foreign invasion. Though the kingdom had lost its prince, so long as his retainers followed his wishes, it would survive.

It was a tragedy, to be sure, but one that brought with it a strange catharsis. Bernadetta had even found herself crying at points—tears that mourned both the prince and everything that was coming to a head in her own future.

Bernadetta and Noel stepped into a quiet alleyway. They had left the theater via the back door, the same way they had entered. Noel had arranged this when booking their tickets, as he wanted to avoid the attention and the commotion that was sure to come with it.

A horse-drawn carriage awaited them on the main road at the mouth of the alley. They'd finished everything on their faux-date agenda, so now the two of them were set to head home.

"I had such fun today," said Bernadetta with a smile. "Thank you so much."

Noel eased into a smile of his own. "No, no, thank *you*. A few more dates like this and we'll have your father fooled. All you have to do then is inform him that I'm a bad fit for marriage, then call things off."

"That much is fine, but even if the dates are fake, I'm not sure what to make of you taking naps during them. If you're tired, I would hope you'd at least tell me."

"I wasn't taking a nap," Noel snapped. "I was awake the whole time."

Bernadetta blinked. "Y-you were asleep! Why deny it?"

“It was your imagination. I did no such thing.”

“But I saw you! You were sleeping!” Noel refused to budge, which infuriated her. “I don’t suppose you’re embarrassed, are you?”

“What?! Not in the slightest!”

“Stubborn, aren’t you? You realize that being so insistent isn’t helping your case?”

“Shut your trap and quit it with the high-and-mighty lecture. I said I wasn’t napping. Are you deaf or just stupid? And if I *was* napping, do you even have proof?”

“Erm, p-proof?”

Bernadetta felt a flush of panic at the sudden aggression in Noel’s attitude. He had far too short a fuse...if he even had a fuse at all. The gentleman who’d accompanied her all day had suddenly vanished, replaced by someone openly and willingly confrontational. Noel crossed his arms and glared daggers at Bernadetta.

“If you think I’m lying, ask me about the play. Anything you want. I bet I can answer.”

“What is this? Why must you be so belligerent?!”

Noel’s hostile tone wore at Bernadetta’s nerves. His beautiful brows furrowed with annoyance.

“Wait a second. *You’re* the one who criticized *me*. I have been humble, modest, and a complete gentleman. Then you come at me with this worthless accusation?! You’re getting to be a real pain in the ass.”

“You were sleeping! I was just warning you about it!”

“And I *told* you that I wasn’t! Listen to me, you idiot!”

“Who are you calling idiot, you runt?! Boys your age are so impudent!”

If there was ever an example of getting what you give, this was it, and Bernadetta’s own speech took on an edge to match Noel’s.

“You’re the one who picked the performance!” she shouted. “So there’s every

chance you already knew what it was about! Answering questions doesn't prove anything!"

"Oh, okay, so you're saying you *can't* prove I was napping? Then you're criticizing me for something you can't even prove. Ugh, people like you are the worst!"

"Proof! Prove! Are they the only two words you know?! You're like a damn parrot!"

"Don't call me a parrot, you flat-chested hysteric!"

"Flat-chested hysteric?! Don't move a single step, whelp! I'm going to rearrange that pretty face of yours right this instant!"

Just as Bernadetta stomped toward Noel, fueled by her rage, a peculiar magical energy flickered through the air—and it was decidedly inhuman. Noel noticed it immediately, and his eyes grew wide with shock.

"Get down!" he shouted.

Bernadetta cried out as Noel threw himself on top of her. The deafening *boom* of an explosion pierced their ears. Something had been bombed, and all around them, hunks of building hurtled through the sky. Noel's quick reaction meant that Bernadetta was uninjured, but some of the falling debris was easily as big as a person's head.

When things settled, Noel stood up and held a hand out to Bernadetta.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Y-yes, thank you."

Clouds of dust surrounded them. It was only when Bernadetta took Noel's hand and rose to her feet that she noticed the blood on his face.

"Did you get hit?!"

"I'm fine. This is nothing," he told her.

"But it happened because you protected me..."

"You're an investment. I can't let you get damaged."

A wry grin grew upon the Talker's face and he gestured to the main street

with his chin.

“Go,” he said. “I’m going to find out what happened.”

Bernadetta nodded, and they walked through the debris and out of the alleyway. The main street was filled with the wailing of the injured. Many had been hurt. The carriage that had been waiting for them had also been hit by flying debris, warping its shape.

A quick look around revealed the building that was most likely ground zero. It wasn’t far from the theater, and though she remembered it being five stories when they went in to watch the performance, it was now only three. Plumes of black smoke wafted up from where the remaining two floors had been.

“You have to go home,” Noel said, lighting a cigarette. “From what I can see, you’re unharmed, and you can make it on your own, yeah? I’m going to stay here and help the first responders. My Talker buffs should provide some support in this hellscape.”

She managed a nod. “Okay, but be careful.” After that, she turned and left.

A sour feeling sloshed inside her. That, without a doubt, the explosion had been Malebolge’s doing. She didn’t know why it had happened, but she had felt the beast’s magical energy. At first, Bernadetta had assumed Malebolge was targeting her, but the attack was far too forgiving. Even as a threat, it was noncommittal.

Whatever the true reasons for the attack were, Malebolge was behind it. Bernadetta did not want to linger on what the creature had wrought. A peaceful section of the city had crumbled in an instant, leaving many people broken, bleeding, and suffering. Bernadetta had even seen mothers clutching their babies among the wounded, crying and wailing. She looked away and left as quickly as she could.

“Is this what it costs?”

The words turned her heart bitter, but they were lost among the screams that filled the air.

After Bernadetta left, I ran to the police and the fire brigade and helped them, as did other good-hearted Seekers. Almost all Seekers learned basic first aid to prepare for an Abyss opening up in a city center. I was no different. The Seekers on the scene were also clearly experienced.

As a clan master in the regalia, I took command, and we managed to see to all the injured before sunset. Though many had been seriously hurt, we were at least fortunate that no one had died. And thanks to having a few experienced Healers on the scene, the wounded could be attended to almost immediately. Those with light wounds were fully healed, and those with more serious injuries were healed to the point that they could at least make it home.

I was taking a quick smoke break when the captain of the fire brigade appeared.

“Thank you so much for your help,” he told me. “Because of you, we moved fast and saved a lot of people. On behalf of all the firefighters here, you have our gratitude.”

“Just doing my duty as a citizen of the empire,” I said. “You worked just as hard as us Seekers did. But I’m wondering...were you able to discern the source of the explosion?”

“No, we still don’t know what it was. The police are investigating as we speak.”

“I see. In that case, would you mind passing on a message for me? I’d like to be informed of what they find. I’ll be here until then.”

“Got it.”

The captain ran off into the distance. The explosion site had been cordoned off by the police, and only related personnel were allowed access.

“This is going to be front-page news tomorrow, that’s for sure,” said a bystander not far from where I stood.

At present, the sun was just sinking over the horizon. Just as I was beginning to look suspicious, standing under the light of a streetlamp surrounded by cigarette butts, someone unexpected appeared before me.

“Well, this is a surprise,” I said.

“Good evening, Noel.”

It was Goat Dinner’s clan master, Dolly Gardner, a bold grin plastered on her face. Behind her was a police officer.

“Well, uh, I’ll leave you two to it,” he said.

I watched him go, then turned my gaze back to Dolly. “You’ve been following the incident, then?”

Of course she had—her appearing with the police officer was far too convenient.

“I *do* like men who are observant, Noel,” she said vaguely. “I heard from the fire brigade that you wanted to learn more about the case?”

“I didn’t know you were already on it. But now that I do, I’m hands-off—I don’t have time to compete with you over something like this.”

I spun on my heel and made to leave.

“Don’t be so hasty,” said Dolly, stopping me. Her expression was suddenly earnest. “I want to ask you a few questions. Let’s call it an exchange. You were here when the explosion went off, right?”

“I was. What of it?”

“Did you notice anything at the time of the explosion? A Seeker of your caliber would have picked up on anything amiss.”

It was a keen observation—and I *had* noticed something.

“I did pick something up,” I said, “but without context, I can’t give you anything concrete. I think you should tell me what you know first.”

Dolly sighed, then offered a nod. “Fine. Take a look at this.”

She brought out a photo and passed it to me. It was a hybrid beast—a woman. I’d never seen her before. *Who is that?*

“Her name is Reisen,” said Dolly, answering my unspoken question. “She’s a broker here in the empire. She dresses like a streetwalker, but she is incredibly dangerous and deals mostly with spies from neighboring countries.”

“And that’s why you’re following her?”

“Among other reasons, yes. Basically, she’s a threat to the empire. I’m already working with the police to track her down. In the midst of that investigation, we came up with some new information. Have you heard of the Netherworld Faith?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a religious organization,” Dolly said, lowering her voice. “A cult of fanatics who worship beasts as gods.”

“What wonderful hobbies people have...”

“They conduct strange rituals that last several days, and they’ve been known to kidnap people to use as human sacrifices. The people at the top of the organization are all antiestablishment.”

“So they’re a terrorist organization hiding behind the facade of a cult?”

“You got it. At the center of the Netherworld Faith is the broker, Reisen. It’s possible she founded it to help a foreign agent.”

“An agent whose main objective is to cause widespread damage through terrorism.”

The most likely suspect was the Republic of Rodania. Loki was there undercover, and I’d received news that fishy activity had been going on for some time.

“So, was this explosion their work?” I asked.

“It was. However, it wasn’t a planned act of terrorism.”

“What does that mean?”

“That explosion happened because I messed up,” said Dolly, her eyebrows creasing with frustration. “That building was used by the cult’s executives. I had one of my people watching the place so we could get a lead on Reisen’s location, but we didn’t get any information to aid in our investigation. I had no other choice but to have my operative kidnap one of the higher-ups so we could interrogate them. None of them are battle-hardened, and my operative was A-Rank. I never imagined that something like this would go down.”

I heard the harsh rage welling up in Dolly as she went on.

“The operative was caught in the explosion and sustained critical injuries. I rushed to the scene when the police contacted me, and I tried to heal her, but her chances look bleak. Her injuries are simply too great, and there’s nothing more I can do with my healing skills. If I’d only been more careful, this never would have happened...”

I understood Dolly’s regret so much that it hurt. I, too, was in a position of leadership. With one command, my companions could live or die. That responsibility was a weight we carried, and it didn’t ease off as your rank increased. It was not something to ever take lightly either—it was the duty of anyone in a position of power.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” I told her. “And I pray for her full recovery.”

Dolly chuckled. “Never thought I’d see the day when you consoled me. But let’s stop wallowing in this sentimentality and get back to the business at hand. After examining the scene, we discovered that the source of the explosion was the kidnapped executive.”

“A human explosive, you mean?”

“An explosive, but not a bomb. It was magical energy. There was magic inside of them that was either detonated from a remote location or due to some kinda condition being met. That’s what caused the damage.”

“Wait, you’re telling me that a magical explosion almost leveled an entire building *and* caused near-fatal injuries to an A-Rank Seeker? I have never, ever heard of a skill with that kind of power.”

“Neither have I,” said Dolly gravely. “Now back to my first question. Noel, did you notice anything at the time of the explosion?”

“I did feel an unusual magical energy,” I said, thinking back on it. “It was a kind of magic I don’t encounter in my day-to-day. At the same time, it was very familiar. It got into my skin, and it was kind of intoxicating.”

“You mean...?”

“Yeah. You know it too, don’t you? It was the same kind of mana that seeps

from Abysses.”

What set an Abyss’s mana apart from the rest was the way it was inherently woven with malice. I’d sensed that ferocious hostility, so I knew it was going to be a pretty large-scale attack.

“Ah... So it’s as I expected,” said Dolly, nodding. “Thank you for your help. It’s been invaluable. With this, we can develop a countermeasure.”

“I’m glad we talked. The Seven Star Cup might have turned into a cult rave if you didn’t share that information with me.”

“It was my pleasure. You have a plan for dealing with them?”

“Tighten up entry to the colosseum. If we put equipment in place to measure mana levels, we can weed out any human explosives. That and anybody exuding weird magical energy.”

“That’s a relief. I am so looking forward to being there as a competitor.”

Dolly was cool, calm, and collected on the surface, but in her heart she was anything but. I could feel that something had been shaken deep inside of her.

“I have to get back to the investigation. Until next time, snake.” Dolly waved a hand and turned to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Dolly’s eyes went wide. “Last time I offered to work together, you turned me down. What kinda game are you playing?”

“We can’t leave terrorists to their own devices,” I said flatly. “I may still hold a grudge against you because of what happened at the regalia meeting, but I don’t mind putting that aside.”

“A grudge? Isn’t that my line? You’re the one who exposed my role in the whole Johann incident.”

“You did that to yourself. If you hadn’t teamed up with Victor to catch me out, I never would have said a thing.”

“So you say. Anyway, I’m over it. And your offer *is* tempting. Particularly that Puppeteer, Hugo. Oh, what I wouldn’t give for his assistance,” said Dolly with a

somewhat shameful grin. “As much as I’d like to take you up on it, I’m going to have to say no.”

“Mind telling me why?”

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’m not doing this out of some kind of revenge for the way you turned me down last time, or for what happened at the regalia meeting. It’s just a matter of pride. I’m sure you’re the same, Noel. Just as you made Johann a target for you and you alone, I’ve got my eyes on Reisen. I will hunt her down myself.”

Dolly smiled then, but her cold, hard refusal of my offer was clear in her eyes. Her dark gaze bore a message: *I will not forgive anyone who gets in my way.*

“All right,” I said. “Then I won’t interfere.”

“Thanks for understanding. I don’t want to have to fight with you. Not yet, anyway. Besides, there’s one problem in particular that hampers us teaming up together.”

I tilted my head. “Which is?”

“You really want to know?”

Dolly stepped in close before I could react, and her soft body pressed close to mine. She whispered sweetly in my ear.

“It’s because—”

Nauseated, I shoved Dolly away. Just as I did, a hysterical voice and unpleasantly familiar voice called out to us.

“Master! Just what do you think you’re doing to Noel?!”

Taken aback, I whirled on the interloper. She was a young woman with blonde hair wearing a leafy green robe. The woman was glaring hard at the two of us.

“Aha. So you *were* following me,” Dolly said, chuckling as she walked over to the furious woman’s side. “I did give a standby order, didn’t I? Or were you just too worried about little Noel to obey?”

Dolly’s underling awkwardly averted her eyes.

“Well, whatever.” Dolly sighed. “I knew very well that you lacked restraint

back when I hired you. I'll give you a pass this time."

"My apologies," the young woman grumbled, her head drooping.

Dolly turned back to me. "Now you know the answer. This girl is the 'hampering factor' I was thinking about."

I'd been watching their back-and-forth with mouth agape in complete and utter shock. I felt pure rage bubbling up from the pit of my stomach.

"What the hell is this?" I spat. "Why are you—"

The rage caught in my throat, and for a moment, I couldn't even speak her name. But I squeezed it out, wishing her dead.

"Why is *Tanya* here?"

Tanya Clark was an ex-member of Blue Beyond, the party I'd formed before Wild Tempest. She had snatched our earnings from under my nose, so I sold her and her partner off as slaves. An old geezer had bought her and then passed away, granting Tanya her freedom. She was supposed to be living a leisurely and satisfied life all on her own.

Yet here she was, a Seeker once more. Based on what I'd heard of her conversation with Dolly, I could assume she was now—somehow—a member of Goat Dinner. I didn't know why, but if Dolly had recruited her as some kind of tool to use against me, then I was not about to let her get away with it.

I caught myself thinking about the familiar weight hanging from my right shoulder. It was the holster under my jacket that held my newly replaced silver flame. I wasn't about to go filling her with bullets right here, but my fury had me in battle mode.

"Don't be mad, Noel," Dolly chided me. "It's a bad look for one so pretty."

In contrast to my seething, murderous rage, she looked free and easy.

"Let me be clear," she continued. "I hired Tanya because I see potential in her. It's as simple as that. As a fellow Healer, I know how to bring out the best in her. Even if there is a...gap in her history."

"That's really the only reason?"

“I swear on it. No ulterior motives. I know it leaves a bad taste in your mouth, but believe me. You can read people’s microexpressions, can’t you?”

If Dolly *was* lying, I would have seen it in her face. But it was just as she said—she was telling the truth. When I took a moment to cool down, it was clear as day.

“Then do what you want,” I said.

With that, I turned and walked away from them both. If Dolly wasn’t intending to use Tanya against me in some way, then what they did was no concern of mine. Tanya was free to join Goat Dinner if she wanted—that was her choice. I wasn’t about to care or worry anymore about it.

I left the cordoned-off crime scene and took to the alleyways to avoid onlookers. The main street was thronged with even more people than it had been earlier, all of them trying to get a look at what had happened while the police and their yellow tape held them back. I felt bad for the officers working security—they’d probably be working all night and into the morning. If the crowd spotted me, their job would only get harder. So I took to the quiet, darker paths.

Then a voice called out from behind me.

“Noel!”

It was Tanya. She was short of breath as she ran over to me. I wanted to ignore her and keep walking, but I didn’t like the idea of her screaming my name and drawing attention. I had no other choice, so I stopped in my tracks.

“What?”

When I turned to face her, Tanya stopped running. But that didn’t stop her moving, and with her shoulders heaving as she caught her breath, she walked toward me. She brought her white hands up to my face, and for a moment they glowed as she healed the wound on my face. I’d been so busy that I’d completely forgotten my own injury.

“Why didn’t you get this healed sooner?” asked Tanya with a somewhat admonishing tone.

I couldn't stand this woman. "I detest you," I spat, smacking her hands away. "You think that if you keep caring I'm going to have a change of heart? Well, you're dead wrong. Stop the stupidity and know your place."

Tanya's face darkened with sorrow, which soon warped into loathing. "I hear you've been dating Ralph Golding's daughter?"

"So what? What's that got to do with you?"

"I told you, didn't I? I'll kill any woman who gets close to you."

"Stop it with the empty threats. You couldn't."

"Oh, but I could. And I'm serious."

I clicked my tongue in annoyance. "Is that what you want? To haunt me your whole life?"

"It is. I will never let you go until you belong to me."

"You want to go overboard, then fine," I muttered.

I was at the limits of my patience. I grabbed Tanya by her shirt, took the silver flame from its holster, and put it to her delicate jaw.

"I will kill you, bitch."

"Do it."



Even with the gun pressed to her face, Tanya showed no fear. Her eyes were empty and unwavering—the only thing in them was my own reflection. She was broken, that much was clear. She loved me so much that she was in pieces, and this was the result.

I felt the slightest, most minuscule iota of pity in my heart.

“You’re not even worth a bullet.”

I released my grip on Tanya and put the silver flame back in its holster.

“I’m warning you,” I said. “Don’t you dare go near Bernadetta Golding.”

“You’ve only just started dating. Is she really that important?” She meant the words as an attack, but her voice wavered, threatening tears. “I hate it. I hate the idea of you with that girl. I don’t care what I have to sacrifice. I *will* kill her.”

“No you won’t,” I replied coldly. “You can’t. Not while I’m around.”

Tears burst from Tanya’s eyes. She bit her lip so hard that it tore and bled. For a time, she was silent. Then she finally turned and trudged away.

“A pitiful thing.”

The silver-haired man who’d spoken stood next to me. He was looking not at me but at the powerless Tanya plodding off into the distance.

“By the looks of things, she’d be much better off if you really *did* kill her,” he added.

“Go to hell.”

At my command, the man vanished. I took a cigarette out and lit it with a match. I watched the tip burn and sucked the sweet flavor into my lungs. Then I let out a deep breath and calmed myself.

“You’re the only one in this entire city who shows me any kindness,” I said.

There was no one around to respond.

Dolly finished talking to the police and was about to head back to the clan house when Tanya returned. She chuckled at the sight of the lifeless young

woman.

“Did he dump you again? You never learn, do you?”

Tanya’s gaze sharpened for a moment, but she slumped almost immediately.

“I know it’s stupid...”

She stood there biting her lip, her eyes downcast. Tears dripped on the ground at her feet.

“We always want what we can’t have. I know the feeling, but it’s especially severe with you, isn’t it?” Dolly said, walking up to Tanya and putting a hand to her shoulder. “You have great potential, Tanya. But to reach it, you need an iron will. You’ll never get stronger if you’re stuck in the past.”

Dolly had hired Tanya purely because of the young woman’s abilities. Actively recruiting the strong didn’t strengthen her own clan; it also kept the other clans in check. Rumor had it that Zeke of Supreme Dragon had approached Noel of his own volition, but things like this were by no means a rarity.

“And if you do get stronger, then maybe the snake—er, Noel—will look at you in a new way, yeah?”

The words were out of character for Dolly, but Tanya just sighed. “I’m going back to the clan house.”

Dolly watched the young woman walk away with heavy steps, shaking her head. “Runs much deeper than I thought.”

Was she expecting too much from Tanya? No. Even if that were the case, hiring Tanya to keep the other clans from poaching her was the right decision.

“Damn, I’m tired...”

Dolly slumped against the wall of a nearby building. Perhaps because she was finally alone, she felt the weight of her exhaustion tugging at her body. She reached into her pocket and brought out a locket. Inside was a photo of a red-haired young woman with a baby. Dolly looked at the photo for a time, then chuckled derisively.

“Stupid girl,” she whispered.

But the voice was so cold, so weak, that she even surprised herself.

The elimination assignments Wild Tempest took on with Leon at the head had nearly wrapped up. They'd traveled across the vast expanse of the empire to complete them, but thanks to the Black Odile, they were right on schedule. The assignments were easier now that the team had leveled up—even a beast of depth-8 was no cause for concern.

Leon was on the airship radio with Noel, updating the clan master on their agenda. Given the speed of their work and their means of travel, he expected them to be back in Etrai sooner than expected. He couldn't hide his joy.

"I think we'll even make it back before the Seven Star Cup preliminaries," Leon said.

He originally expected them to get back sometime during the preliminaries, which wasn't really an issue considering Wild Tempest would only be competing in the finals. Nonetheless, it was nice to know they'd be getting home early.

"We owe a lot to the airship. It's way too fast! It was downright shocking at first." Leon laughed, and he heard Noel chuckling too.

"Was anyone airsick?"

"Hugo vomited."

"Hugo? Color me surprised," Noel said. "I would've put my money on Koga."

"It caught me off guard as well, but it seems he's not comfortable on airships."

"He should have said something beforehand. I had no idea."

"Well, he thought he'd be able to manage, since he's fine on his puppet- Valkyries, but it looks like he gets sick when someone else is in control. He was white as a sheet and stuck in the bathroom for a while."

"Quite the feat, managing that and beast assignments at the same time."

"I gave him some of my motion sickness medication. It seemed to do the trick."

“Always prepared, aren’t you?”

“Well, thanks to you, medication is just another part of my everyday life now. It’s more than just motion sickness tablets, you know.”

Noel snickered at Leon’s wry attempt at humor. He was going to retort with something along the lines of “It’s no laughing matter,” but he knew it was pointless.

“Koga’s training is going well,” Leon went on. “I’m not sure whether he’ll rank up in time for his match, but we know two things for sure: he’s motivated, and he’s way stronger than he was before we left.”

“There’s no turning back for him now, not after the way he shot his mouth off.”

“There you go again,” Leon said. “*You’re* the one who ordered him to do this, Noel. Shouldn’t you give him a little credit?”

“I’ll give him credit when he shows results. I don’t care for talk.”

“So if Koga does show results, you’ll praise him for a job well done?”

Noel said nothing. There were no issues with the radio, which meant Noel simply didn’t want to answer the question. He was stubborn about the strangest things, but it was part and parcel of his youth. Leon suppressed a chuckle.

“Anyway, is it true you’ve entered into marriage talks with a young lady?”

“Yep. I’ve been on a few dates with Ralph Golding’s daughter. You heard from the newspapers?”

“I did. We’ve got connections to a branch of the empire’s papers, so I knew about their morning article by noon. Everyone’s shocked, you know. I mean, haven’t you always detested that kind of thing?”

“I have my reasons,” Noel said, his voice laced with exhaustion. “I’ll give you the rundown when we next meet for drinks.”

Leon laughed good-naturedly. “Can’t wait. But you’d best be on guard. Depending on the contents of that rundown, Alma might have a knife with your name written on it. She’s been fuming since she found out.”

“Really now?”

“As soon as she heard, she caused a ruckus. Said she was going to go back alone to confront you about it herself. We managed to calm her down a little, but outside of work, she’s been cooped up in her room mumbling your name like some kind of mantra. It’s straight out of a horror show.”

“Don’t care. It wouldn’t be the first time she’s gone off the rails.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you, yeah? I’m not getting in the middle if anything happens.”

Leon wasn’t going to get in the way of a rampaging Alma ever again. Fortunately, she hadn’t unsheathed her knives, but all the same, he and Hugo and Koga had all taken one heck of a beating just to calm her down. Those wounds had since been healed, but they still stung beneath the surface. Koga had gotten the worst of it, due to their already-poor relationship. Alma had crushed his jaw and broken his ribs. Compared to Alma, a raging tiger was like a harmless kitten.

“Whatever,” said Noel, uninterested. “Anything else to report?”

Leon shook his head even though they couldn’t see each other. “Nope. That’s about it.”

“If anything comes up, get in touch. Travel safe.”

After that, Leon turned off the radio. He decided to take a shower and hit the hay. It was already midnight, and they had another assignment tomorrow, so Leon didn’t want to stay up too late. He was walking down the airship corridor, yawning, when he bumped into Hugo. The Puppet Master was in his pajamas, staring out the window.

“Hi, Hugo. Something up?”

Hugo motioned out the window with his chin. Leon looked out at the grassy plain to which the airship was anchored and saw Koga. The Longswordsman was completely focused on swinging his weapon over and over.

“Didn’t you say that training was over for the day?” asked Leon.

“It is. Koga wanted to keep going.”

“Won’t that do more harm than good?”

“Not necessarily. You can’t rank up unless you *surpass* your limits. It is possible to get closer to ranking up by putting your body through such intense suffering that you enter a trancelike state.”

Leon nodded and took a step back from the window. “Do you think Koga can rank up in time?”

“He is in good shape. He can take out a hundred automated puppet soldiers on his own now. That is a dramatic improvement over how things were when he started. It’s just...” Hugo’s words trailed off.

“The ‘it’ factor is still missing,” Leon finished for him.

Koga’s training was on track, there was no doubt about that. His rate of improvement had also been boosted thanks to Leon acting as another training partner while they were on this expedition. Leon had felt Koga’s growth firsthand. At the same time, Leon knew that Koga wouldn’t rank up if they kept going on the same track.

“You are of the same mind, I see,” Hugo said.

“His abilities are amazing, but he needs to realize them for himself. If we tell him how it felt for us to get to A-Rank, we run the risk of confusing him. But his pursuit of strength and power is too haphazard—he has to align himself with his goals.”

“Hardly something easy to put into words. That ideal and essential strength is different for all of us.”

“Koga has to have realized that he’s missing something. That’s why he’s still out there, swinging his sword. He’s looking within himself, confronting who he is. All that’s left now is a battle against the clock. There is little more we can do.”

Hugo nodded to himself, then moved away from the window.

“Going to sleep?” asked Leon.

“No, I’m going to cook up something for Koga. He will need to refuel eventually.”

Leon's eyes went wide with surprise. "Like a midnight snack, you mean? You're really devoted, aren't you?"

Hugo turned back to Leon with a secretive grin. "Koga getting stronger is good for all of us," he said, his grin growing wider. "Best of all, if Koga wins the Seven Star Cup, Noel gets a hot, steaming cup of comeuppance."

"My goodness," Leon replied with a chuckle. "*That's* why you're doing this?"

Hugo tilted his head. "Are you saying you would rather not see it?"

"What? I mean, who are you kidding? Of course I do."

"Right?"

Everyone respected Noel, but there was mischief interwoven with that admiration. They wanted to see him taken down a notch.

"Well, let me help you out. I know my way around a kitchen."

"Great. Let us whip up something tasty."

The two men nodded in agreement and headed for the airship kitchen.

"By the way," Leon ventured, wishing to ask about something that was niggling at him. "Just how long are you going to carry that pillow under your arm?"

"Hmph!"

Hugo's face went red. He chucked his pillow away and took off down the corridor like he was running away. Leon laughed and followed after him. The night was still young for the three men in Wild Tempest.

Chapter 3:

The Seven Star Cup

“THE DAY is finally, *finally* upon us!”

The young woman’s voice boomed through the loudspeakers to the fifty thousand people in the empire’s colosseum. Communal joy and excitement bubbled through the crowd—a feeling that had only grown as they painstakingly waited for this day to come.

I was on the top floor of the colosseum, in the VIP lounge. I looked down at the girl with the microphone in the commentary booth. She was the Seven Star Cup’s play-by-play commentator, a young gnome who had chestnut-brown hair with two locks tied up on either side. Like most gnomes, she was short with a youthful, childish face. Her frilly pink-and-white dress only enhanced her adorable features.

“I am Luna Luce! I am so honored to be your commentator for this event! I could practically die!”

Luna was a pop star getting a lot of attention recently. She was obsessed with Seekers, and this knowledge paired with her

fame made her the perfect announcer. I wasn’t the one who’d picked her—the recommendation had come from her producer, Finocchio, who sat beside her. He’d be taking on color commentator duties.

“It’s been three long weeks since the press conference featuring Prince Caius and Noel Stollen, who we all know as the genius clan master of Wild Tempest *and* third-tier regalia member! I’m willing to bet that I wasn’t the only one suffering sleepless nights of buzzing excitement! This is the day we’ve all been waiting for, the day our dreams come true! That’s right!” Luna’s voice grew louder as she said, “It’s the opening of the Seven Star Cup, where one Seeker will be crowned the empire’s strongest!”

The crowd roared with such enthusiasm that the colosseum shook. Screams and shouts rang out into the air, but Luna was not about to be drowned out by

the zealous cheers.

“Ladies! Gentlemen! Let’s not burn ourselves out before the event has even started! As of today, we’ve got one week of preliminary matches to look forward to! But don’t let the name fool you... Every single Seeker in the preliminaries is renowned for their prowess! So let’s get wild and cheer with everything we’ve got to send these Seekers off to battle! Woo-hooooo!”

At Luna’s cry, the entire audience shouted back in unison: “Woo!”

They were all united; Luna was doing a fantastic job. I was impressed.

“She’s so lacking in class it’s practically nonexistent,” Prince Caius said with a sigh, as if even the effort of saying so annoyed him. He was blatantly unenthused.

The prince was with me in the VIP lounge, along with his security detail and a number of the empire’s rich and famous.

“Couldn’t you have chosen someone a little more suitable?”

“I think she’s perfect,” I countered. “It’s her first time as a commentator, but the crowd hasn’t intimidated her in the slightest. She’s owning the role.”

Caius’s face scrunched up in obvious disgust. “Surely there were others who could just as easily have...owned the role. Ugh. Well, at least I’m not in the *other* lounge.”

He looked over at the VIP lounge on the opposite side of the colosseum. The emperor, members of the imperial family, and nobles in government were there watching the event. Caius hated them. He took issue with the fact that, when he put his support behind the Seven Star Cup, they all looked down on him for mingling with the common people. The prince carried himself with such arrogance, yet even a minor slight like this consumed him. He was about as big a man as his balls, which I assumed were minuscule.

I kept an eye on him as the openers continued.

“While our competitors prepare to fight, and before I explain the rules of the tournament, I’d like to introduce our color commentator, Finocchio. Take it away, sis!”

“I’m Finocchio Barzini,” the mad clown said, “and I’m the manager of this tournament as well as its color commentator. I usually work in management consulting and producing pop stars like our wonderful Luna here. Let’s all have a marvelous time here at the Seven Star Cup!”

Finocchio winked and blew kisses to the crowd. His handsomeness and charm had them enthralled. Although many spectators cheered, those who knew Finocchio’s true identity did not. Even the clown himself—the empire’s most dangerous gangster *and* a slave trader—could never have imagined he’d be on a stage like this one.

“The Seven Star Cup is a tournament unlike any other,” said Luna. “What makes it so unique is that the competitors are protected from any and all injuries. The two Megaliths you see by the rings absorb any damage to competitors synced with it. Now I know what some of you may be thinking: *What’s the point if there’s no damage? Where are the stakes?!* But rest easy, ye who doubt! While damage is absorbed by the Megaliths, competitors will still feel the pain of every attack. What’s more, the attacks they receive will impede their mobility just as they would in a real battle. Right, sis?”

“Spot on, Luna. For example, if an arm is cut deep, the competitor will not be able to move it or use it. The effects of poison are also accurately reflected in the competitors’ conditions.”

Luna let out a gasp of awe. “Poisons too? Amazing!”

“Indeed. That’s why it’s in the best interests of all competitors to treat this as a real fight. Avoiding damage is your best bet!”

“When a competitor takes too much damage—that is, when the Megalith hits its damage limit—the synced competitor will be rendered immobile. If a competitor attempts to attack an opponent that has fallen unconscious but still has not hit the Megalith’s damage limit, the attacking *competitor* will be immobilized. There are no referees in the Seven Star Cup matches, so this action acts as a referee stoppage. Any competitor who attempts to attack a downed and fully damaged opponent will be disqualified without question. So let’s all follow the rules!”

Luna and Finocchio then went on to explain the rules: the two-skill limit

registered in advance, the weapon restrictions, and so on. They also clarified that losses were incurred when a competitor stepped out of bounds, could no longer fight, wouldn't rise after a ten-count, or conceded the match.

After that, one of the tournament organizers approached the commentary booth and whispered in Luna's ear, causing her to perk up.

"Good news, everyone! I've just been informed that preparations are complete! Let's give a big hand as we welcome the competitors for Block One of the preliminaries!"

The spectators clapped and cheered, and a symphony orchestra played a marching tune as the competitors appeared at the ringside entrance. There were twenty Seekers in total—forty if you counted cornermen. The initial competitors, all clad in their gear, waved at the crowd. I recognized numerous faces among them.

I spotted Wolf, Lycia, Veronica, and Logan right away—four members of Mirage Trident. By the looks of things, Wolf and Veronica were the competitors, while Lycia and Logan were on cornerman duties. All of them were clearly much stronger than they'd been when last I saw them. The battle and experience they'd gained from their clash with Lorelai had opened new doors for them. That said, it was bad luck for two pairs in the same clan to fight in the same block.

"How many competitors are there in total?" asked Caius, his eyes fixed on the Seekers below.

"One hundred and thirty in the preliminaries," I said.

"So aside from the regalia, every single clan in the empire has two representatives in the tournament. Astounding." A hint of a smile crossed the prince's face.

"Just goes to show how excited the Seekers were for this. Because of the huge number of applicants, we broke them up into separate blocks. Some of them will have to fight a lot to get to the finals, but it's not a bad deal when you consider the point of the tournament. The more a Seeker fights, the more they get to show off their strength and the more their stock rises."

“But won’t some of them simply want to win?”

“Well, that comes down to luck, which is just as big a part of Seeking as anything else. Those who refuse to bend to its will have no choice but to grow strong enough to overcome it. If you don’t have it in you, this industry will chew you up and spit you out.”

Caius nodded, then shot me a sidelong glance. “Speaking from personal experience?”

I laughed. “It’s just common sense.”

I took sips of wine throughout our conversation. By the time the bottle on the side table was half empty, the competitor entrances and the opening ceremony had ended. Seekers took their places in the rings for the first round.

Finally, it was time. The battles that would determine the empire’s strongest Seeker were about to begin.

The preliminaries consisted of four concurrent matches. That meant four fights taking place in four rings at the same time. Though all the competitors were B-Rank, I could tell immediately that they were all fighting at a very high level. Any one of these competitors was equally capable of victory. The spectators watched on with wide eyes, ecstatic at the chance to finally watch Seeker-on-Seeker combat.

The scream that tore through the air chilled everyone to the bone.

“Aaahhhhh!”

The voice sounded like death throes, and everybody—spectators and other competitors alike—turned toward it. A Seeker was clasp- ing his left arm, spit flying from the corners of his mouth as he fainted. He was in such extreme pain that even his opponent was shocked.

“Whoa! What in the world is going on?!” cried Luna. “Gilliam is down, and by the looks of things, can no longer stand! But even his opponent is flabbergasted by what just happened! Big sis, can you fill us in?” She whirled on Finocchio with expectation in her eyes.

Finocchio nodded. “Put simply, Gilliam fell because he was unable to bear the pain. He and his opponent are both Gladiators, and their strength-based classes had them stuck in a deadlock. Gilliam decided on a risky strategy: to take a minor hit in order to counter with something fatal. He invited his opponent to take his left arm to open a path to a swift beheading. However, the Megalith instilled the appropriate level of pain before he could strike back, and Gilliam fainted.”

“Aha, he underestimated the Megaliths. The pain was so beyond his expectations that he fell unconscious! Wow, what a sad way to go!”

Luna didn’t pull any punches with her conclusion, and Finocchio responded with a wry chuckle.

“You’re correct, my little Lulu, but let’s not forget that Gilliam is an exceptional Seeker. We all saw the extent of his resolve. In real battle, Gilliam wouldn’t have flinched—he would’ve let his arm go flying so he could take his opponent’s head.”

“Huh?! Wait, wait,” said Luna, puzzled. “But Gilliam fainted from the pain, right? Are you saying that the pain reflected from the Megaliths is more than what it would be in real life?”

“Exactly that,” Finocchio said, bobbing his head.

“What?! How does that work?!”

“It’s pure pain, really. The Megaliths absorb bodily damage, but they reflect the equivalent pain or paralysis. The system works via simple electrical signals, which travel through the nerves to simulate damage. Put simply, the Megalith fools the brain.”

A cruel smile grew upon Finocchio’s face as he went on.

“However—and this was quite the surprising discovery for us—when the Megalith generates the illusion of pain, this signal to the brain bypasses any physical boosts imbued by the competitor’s class. Ordinarily, Gilliam could’ve withstood the pain of his arm being cut off, but without his physical boosts—that is to say, when faced with the pain in its purest form—he could not. That is the truth behind Gilliam’s defeat.”

The so-called “pure pain” Finocchio spoke of was not something I had intended. It was just a coincidence. We’d discovered it when I tested the Megaliths myself. I had linked to one and cut my right arm with a knife, only to be assaulted by a pain beyond anything I knew as normal. At first I thought that there’d been some kind of calibration mistake, but I quickly realized that the pain itself was different; the real problem was with *me*.

Regardless of specialization, all battle classes had physical buffs. In terms of physical prowess, this meant increased strength, agility, and endurance. One effect of an endurance buff was its ability to lessen pain, but that effect was bypassed when the brain was given a straight dose of pain.

Although the Talker class had little in the way of these buffs to begin with, we *did* have strong mental fortitude, which allowed us to remain focused against whatever external forces were at play. Nonetheless, the moment I cut myself with that knife, the pain was so intense that I could barely move.

Through further experimentation, I learned how to endure that pain, but it was a much harder task for anyone who wasn’t used to it. This wasn’t a matter of pain tolerance; for battle classes, this was literally a pain we’d never known before. Even the strongest of the strong could not stand a pain that went beyond their imagination.

The combatants who had stopped fighting at the scream and heard Finocchio’s explanation quickly grasped the situation, and their faces went pale as the worst-case scenario dawned on them.

“What the hell?” said Caius, frowning. “This is supposed to be an injury-free tournament. These competitors could end up disabled. None of this means anything if we lose the battle to the Valiant because we’re lacking in manpower. Do you even understand the situation we’re in, Noel?”

“With all due respect, your worries are entirely misplaced, Your Highness. Observe,” I said, jerking my chin toward the rings.

“What the...?” uttered Caius, his eyes growing wide. “But why?”

The three remaining matches had resumed, and all the competitors were locked in fierce battle. Their fears had vanished, replaced by even more refined movements than before. Sparks flew as blades clashed, magic lit up the air, and

arrows filled the sky like rain. Now that all the Seekers knew the risks, their senses were heightened.

Caius balked at the sight. “They’ve gotten stronger. But how? They’re not even members of the regalia...”

“They’re still among the best of the best. None of them fear death. They take that risk and spin it into strength—a springboard to greater heights. They know that the path to power only comes from a life-or-death struggle. Their survival instincts have come alive. This has always been the way of the battle classes.”

“I know that, but this is...”

“Your Highness, Seekers like Johann and myself are not the only heroes. Those Seekers down there have the potential to become heroes too. The Seven Star Cup is a place to break free from the restraints that bind them. They do this through battle. It is a desire built within them—it is a mentality.”

Caius looked perplexed for a moment, then let out a sigh and relaxed. “I hate to admit it, but you’re right. You may be on the regalia now, but wallow in your pride and someone will soon knock you from your perch.”

“I can assure you, wholeheartedly, that I will *not* allow that to happen,” I said, raising my wine glass to the competitors in a toast. “And I will prove it to you here, at the Seven Star Cup. I will stand at its peak by the end.”

The fights in the first block progressed smoothly until only two Seekers remained, battling it out for a place in the finals. On one side was the brunette dual-wielding Gladiator, Wolf. His opponent was an old Paladin who had defeated Veronica.

Though the Paladin’s strength had clearly deteriorated with age, his outstanding swordsmanship enabled him to lock down the Ifrit-infused Veronica and come out on top. He was a true warrior. The Paladin was A-Rank, outclassing Veronica’s B-Rank. Combat abilities differed between ranks, but this was not an impossible hurdle. Veronica had lost because she had been completely overwhelmed.

But even the most powerful of warriors could not beat the sands of time.

“Eat this! *Vorpal Sword!*”

In a moment of clarity, Wolf, who was on the back foot, saw the glimmer of an opening and filled it with a dashing lightning attack on the Paladin. In response, the old warrior blocked it with his shield and engaged a defensive skill. Even then, he still could not stop Wolf, who had put his heart and his soul into his frontal assault.

It was all too easy to see the words carved into the Paladin’s face: “If only I still had *X Invincible*.” It was the ultimate defensive skill a Knight could use to deflect any attack back on its attacker. But he’d already used it, and the skill had a cooldown period of twenty-four hours. Though his storied career and incredible swordsmanship had helped him take the lead in the fight with Wolf, he now flinched in the face of the Gladiator’s wild, reckless assault.

Age had dulled the old Paladin’s fighting spirit.

Wolf roared like a starved hunting dog with its fangs sunk deep into its prey. Then, looking panicked and regretful, the Paladin was flung out of the ring.

“We have a ring out!” Luna shouted immediately. “Our winner is Wolf Lehman, clan master of Mirage Triad! What a feat! What an upset! Who would have expected a B-Rank Seeker to defeat an A-Rank opponent?! Talk about giant-slaying! Let’s give both of our athletes the applause they deserve for such a heated battle in the preliminaries!”

Wolf threw both his hands in the air and let out a victory howl as the crowd cheered. The old Paladin looked as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. This tournament was his last chance at raising his stock, and though he had put in a valiant effort, the consequences of his age were all too apparent. It was clear that he would not be able to contribute to the battle against the Valiant.

Now that he’d been defeated, an exhausted smile rose to his face. Just how much had he sacrificed to attain his strength? Even if he’d gained a great deal, he probably lost just as much. I applauded him in my heart out of respect for his sacrifices as a Seeker.

“If the tournament didn’t have ring outs, that old Paladin would have won,” Caius lamented. “He still has some fight left in him.”

Perhaps his thoughts were with the old Warrior's position, or maybe it was sympathy.

"In any case," I said, "his age and his deteriorating strength were both on display today. He's useless."

The ring out was neither here nor there. The moment the old Paladin flinched before Wolf's assault, his path to glory had evaporated. Even if he had defeated Wolf, he probably would've pulled out of the finals. Someone as battle-hardened as that veteran would've known what he was up against.

"What goes up must come down. Even the strongest cannot defeat the hands of time."

"True, but is that really everything? I noticed something watching your face as this battle took place: you have ties to Wolf, don't you? Don't think I didn't catch that hint of a smile on your face when he won."

The prince was sharper than I gave him credit for. Maybe I should've expected that.

"I've known him since we were both rookies," I said. "We're friends."

But our relationship was not about friendship—it was one of iron sharpening iron. I was higher in terms of rank and power, but only because I had aspired to reach his level back in my Blue Beyond days. Such was the nature of our "friendship."

"Friends? The idea that you're capable of such feelings shocks me."

"I shouldn't have them, then?"

Caius shook his head. "No, but be good to your friends. When they're gone... well, you can never talk to them again."

"Naturally."

I nodded and looked back at the ring, where an overjoyed Wolf grinned ferociously and pointed at me in the VIP lounge. I could read him like a book: *"You're next."*

"As his friend, I want nothing more than to mercilessly destroy him," I said.

Caius's expression grew taut when he saw the smile tugging at my lips.

With that, the first-block preliminaries were over. Things would probably go just as smoothly tomorrow. We'd seen no movement from the terrorist group Dolly told me about, but we weren't about to lessen our security measures. I predicted that they would make a move during the finals, not the preliminaries. That was when the regalia would also be in attendance. If the terrorists were capable of human explosives that could leave A-Rank Seekers in critical condition, they weren't going to be scared off by the regalia. In fact, they'd likely rejoice at having them all in one place.

To stop such terrorism, security had to be tightened for the finals. However, this came with its own problems.

I left the VIP lounge to meet with Finocchio about tomorrow's schedule. My footsteps echoed through the long corridor as I walked toward the conference room. As I was thinking about the tournament, I became aware of footsteps approaching from the other end of the corridor.

Instantly, I knew they didn't belong to any of the organizing staff—these were the footsteps of someone ready for battle. They were prepared to spring or receive an ambush. It was the stride of a formidable opponent. I heard the clink of metal as well. Perhaps they used chains as their weapon?

I stopped where I was and sparked up a cigarette. There was no need to rush; all I had to do was wait to see how they chose to attack. I continued to smoke as a thin young man appeared from around the corner. He had ash-gray hair and wore loose-fitting clothes. He was covered in silver accessories wherever he could put them—which I assumed was the source of the clinking metal. Necklaces, bracelets, chains, piercings, and tribal tattoos adorned his neck and rigid collarbone. It was a loud look.

In contrast to his appearance, there was something weak about him. He was all skin and bones, and there were dark circles under his eyes like he wasn't getting enough sleep. His posture was slouched forward. Even with his vibrant and aggressive appearance, he looked anything but strong. His one saving grace was a face so perfectly put together it could have been a doll's.

And yet, this was the man whose footsteps I had found so threatening.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, scratching the back of his shaved head as he sauntered toward me. “I’m Keith Zappa, leader of Imperial Delinquents. Nice to meet you.”

The man standing before me—Keith—gave a slight bow. His smile revealed his youth. He was taller than me, but he looked younger. Braces covered his white teeth.

Something else had caught my attention, though.

“You’re Keith Zappa? Of Imperial Delinquents? Liar. I have intel on every competitor in the Cup, and you’re not Keith.”

The Keith I knew was nothing at all like the boy standing before me. I’d never actually met Keith, but this guy didn’t match the reports from my information brokers: the real Keith was a mountain of muscle, and his clan had been officially recognized by the Seekers Association just one month after being founded. He was a generational talent. I was willing to admit that the Keith before me was strong, but he was nothing like what I’d heard.

Keith responded to my accusation with a derisive chuckle. “I assure you, I am *the* Keith Zappa,” he said. “Should I call over my Seeker coordinator to prove it? That’ll get you your proof.”

I read between the lines. “You bought out my information broker, huh?”

I’d been given a false report. I could punish the guilty party later, but right now, I had to work out Keith’s intentions. He couldn’t fool me by simply buying out one of my information brokers—the Barzini operatives had conducted their own investigation based on my broker’s intel, and their loyalty to Finocchio was absolute. They were impossible to bribe. That meant Keith didn’t just have a false report made; he also had a fake Keith walking around in his place.

But why? Why go so far?

The most likely reason was that he wanted to keep his abilities completely hidden. If an otherwise unknown Seeker could deceive his opponent, he’d already earned an advantage on the battlefield. There was another possibility: Keith had a special skill that he wanted to hide. Whatever the reason, he was

cunning. The guy was resourceful, he knew how to take initiative, and more than anything else, he knew the power of patience.

All that being said, I still didn't understand why he was here.

"If you went to all that trouble to deceive me—and I know it wasn't cheap—then why reveal yourself here?" I asked. "Are you afraid you'll have your participation rights revoked? Is that it? Are you here to apologize?"

"I wouldn't do anything so humiliating. What do I have to apologize for, anyway? So I deceived you, fair enough. But it was just you. I haven't broken any tournament rules, yet you're saying I could get my participation rights revoked? That would be an abuse of power. I want to compete in the Seven Star Cup—not allowing me to do so would mean I'd have to talk to some people."

In other words, he'd be loud and public about unfair treatment. I had to hand it to the guy—he had guts. Not only had he fooled me, but now he was trying to intimidate me.

"So why turn up in front of me? You didn't come here just to brag, did you? To tell me you got me?"

"Actually, that's *exactly* why I'm here."

My head cocked to the side. "What the hell?" I asked incredulously.

Keith scratched his cheek bashfully. "To be honest, I'm a huge fan," he said. "You're a Talker, the weakest of all classes. Yet you didn't let that stop you! Instead, you used any and every means you could to control and manipulate the rich and the famous. Now you're on the regalia. As a Seeker on the rise, you're the greatest inspiration there is." His eyes narrowed. "That's why I wanted to see you face-to-face and tell you all about how I one-upped you."

"Huh... Okay, I get it now. You're an idiot. You buy out an information broker and that somehow earns you bragging rights? You're embarrassing yourself."

"That doesn't sound like you, Noel. You know better than anyone the power of information and what it means to control it. I know you've been busy organizing the tournament, but losing control of one of your lines of intel? That's not a good look. With your Faceless friend in Rodania, shouldn't you be

more careful? Have your guard up?”

“You little shit...”

How did a punk like him know that? The only people privy to Loki’s assignment in Rodania were the Wild Tempest clan members and my most trusted confidants. I couldn’t imagine any one of them ratting me out. But how did Keith find out about the information brokers in the first place? If he didn’t have eyes of his own in the capital, none of it made any sense.

Which left only one possibility.

“It was you, wasn’t it? You’re the reason the Seekers Association removed Harold as Wild Tempest’s coordinator.”

Keith responded with a brazen nod. “I am. It’s what you would’ve done, isn’t it?”

“No comment,” I spat. “I don’t have to answer that.”

“Oh come on. Don’t be so stingy. Wait...are you mad?” Keith took a step forward, peering down at me as he did so. “I’m actually disappointed. You’re the snake. You’re feared as the most aggressive Seeker in the entire empire. But you let a rookie like me give you the runaround.”

I said nothing, and Keith chuckled.

“I turned fifteen the other day,” he prattled on. “I could finally register as a Seeker. And growing enough to put a clan together? It was a cakewalk. So dull. Where’s the challenge, you know? I look up to you, but even *you* spent a whole year in obscurity. If you think about it, I’ve kinda surpassed you in a way.”

His grin challenged me even though he knew his words didn’t hold any water. He sure did like to talk, though. Even if he looked up to me, that didn’t mean he had to copy me right down to the way I berated people. On the one hand, I was pleased to see an up-and-comer using my own methods as a kind of textbook. On the other, I couldn’t stand how embarrassed it made me of my own actions.

So I decided to put an end to things.

“Let me ask you something, Keith.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Doesn’t it make you feel empty, flaunting your daddy’s power and influence?”

This was a gamble of sorts—a trick. I didn’t know anything for certain, but based on the information I’d inferred since we started talking—and by process of elimination—I’d come to this conclusion. It was a guess, yes, but there was a very good chance it was a fact. Only a few organizations in the empire had an intel network that surpassed the Barzini family’s *and* could keep tabs on their operatives. So few, in fact, that I could count them on a single hand.

Keith was at first shocked by my question, but then his rage revealed itself. Gone was the cool, impudent kid, replaced by a wild beast hungry for blood. It was clear then that I’d hit a soft spot—softer than even I’d expected. Didn’t surprise me, though. Anyone who looked up to and copied my own path was bound to be proud and arrogant—of course they’d be enraged if I told them they were sponging off their parents.

Still, Keith’s response was so eerily in line with what I expected that I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. Keith looked shocked.

“You tricked me...” he muttered. “And I fell for it.”

“I wasn’t expecting that,” I said, “but your face is like an open book.”

“I should have anticipated this from a Talker. You’ve got me beat, there.” Keith heaved a sigh, then straightened up. “I know I can’t do it now, but one day I *will* make you kneel before me. And not through talking but through Seeking. I came here today to make that known. And that’s important, right? Making yourself known?”

“You’ve got guts. It’s admirable. You’ve earned that compliment today.”

“Thank you. I’m going to do it like you did—I’m going to demolish anything that stands in my way. You just watch me.”

I nodded, then flicked away my cigarette butt.

“But as far as timing goes, right here? Right now? It’s just you and me. Why not ditch all that talk of the future and force me to take a knee right now?” I grinned, knowing something he didn’t.

Keith's eyes bulged. "Are you serious?"

"Unlike you, I don't have time for boring lies. But I will tell you this: you'll never have a chance like this again."

"So...right here? This place is important to the Seven Star Cup, right? Isn't it possible you'll lose your rank after getting into a scrap with a rookie like me here?"

Keith took a step backward. My sudden challenge had him panicking. Now it was my turn to step forward.

"Anytime, anywhere," I said. "You want to surpass me, don't you? If I were you, I wouldn't let my prey escape. Not when they were standing right in front of me."

Keith laughed. "Are you for real? You're freaking off the charts, man. Well, if you insist..."

Excitement bubbled behind Keith's grin, and he prepared himself for close-quarters combat. I knew then that he could not be underestimated—there were no gaps in his stance, and I felt the purity of his magical energy. It was a graceful, natural fighting stance. As I silently reached into my coat for my silver flame, Keith broke his stance and raised his hands in surrender.

"I know it's one heck of an opportunity, but this time, I'm gonna pass."

I chuckled. "So quick to give up. You're not going to surpass me like that."

"Yeah, but I know my place. I'm humbled. You're more intelligent, powerful, and especially cunning than I ever imagined. We could fight here a thousand times and I'd lose every last one. And I don't fight battles I can't win."

Keith began to back away, but I kept my guard up.

"If that's everything, I'll be taking my leave," said Keith. "I'm glad I got to meet you, Noel. I'm in tomorrow's Block Two—don't miss it."

Keith shot me a bold, confident grin, then bounded off quicker than a hare. He was *fast*. I snickered as I stared down the corridor even after he'd left.

"Cunning? The kid's impressive," said Alma via *Link*. "He sensed me."

Wild Tempest had returned from their expedition two days ago, and Alma was on bodyguard duty. She'd been hiding in the ceiling right above me.

"I thought I'd completely erased any sign of my presence," she said, disappointed. "That just killed my day."

I shook my head with a laugh. "I know you weren't using any skills, but you *had* erased your presence entirely. His senses are a cut above."

"A prodigy, you mean? You sure it was okay to let him go? I could have killed him on the spot."

"It's like what Caius said earlier—we'll need all the best Seekers we can get to prepare for the battle against the Valiant."

"Hmph. All right, fine. You really are popular with the weird ones, huh?"

"When you point at someone, there are three fingers pointing back at you."

"Eh, weird is fun. I'll take that Keith kid over one of those mass-produced rich daughter types any day of the week. I feel way more at ease around him than—hey! I'm joking, I'm joking! Quit pointing your gun at me!"

I sighed and put the silver flame back in its holster. I already missed the days when Alma was away on her expedition, but we agreed on one thing: weird was indeed more fun. If I was going to live a short life, then I wanted it filled with enemies who would give me a good time.

And now I had something new to look forward to—Keith's performance in Block Two.

When the next day rolled around, Block Two opened to huge excitement from the crowd. None of their passion had dulled since the matches the previous day, and if anything, they were even rowdier than before. It was the middle of winter, but the colosseum was practically on fire.

One reason for the huge level of anticipation was Wolf's upset victory. It hadn't just captured the hearts of the public—it had been huge for the Barzini family's betting operation. Wolf had been weaker in terms of experience and rank, so not many people put their money on him. In fact, the betting lines were

so skewed that they almost couldn't finalize them. Then Wolf had taken the battle into his own hands, and those who bet on him found themselves rewarded with unbelievably huge sums of money. The losing betters weren't fazed by the upset—they were just hungry to make up for it in the coming matches.

As a result, even more betting money was being put down than on day one. Yesterday, total sales had come to fifty billion fil. Today we predicted eighty. And it wasn't just the public who were hedging their bets—even nobles and the wealthy were putting their coin down. It was more money than both Finocchio and I had ever expected. Thanks to Finocchio putting effort into foreign advertising, even the rich from outside of the empire were betting via representatives. Over these next few days, the amount of foreign capital rolling into the empire was going to be crazy.

The tournament was raking it in, and we were only on the second day. If we used our current numbers to predict our potential income for the day of the finals, the figure was astronomical. At the management meeting at the end of the first day, I could practically see the piles of potential fil in Finocchio's eyes.

None of the money from the betting operations lined *my* pockets. That was the deal. I was entitled only to earnings made through the tournament itself, and even then I was splitting the proceeds with Finocchio. Naturally, we were making a killing on ticket sales and the shops within the colosseum, but it was nothing compared to the betting action.

Finocchio had offered to draw up a new contract, but I refused. I needed him to become the new Luciano family don. All the money he made would go toward strengthening and reinforcing his position, and I would not touch it.

The executive meeting for the Luciano family was set to take place that night, and I would be attending with Finocchio. I already had a series of plans in mind based on how the heads of family would react, but nothing was set in stone. We still had to be prepared for the worst-case scenario: all-out gang wars. I had plans in place to avoid that, but the time for them would come later. I expected that they would even please Finocchio, who was disappointed to hear his war was going to be canceled.

It was while I was thinking about my evening plans that Keith Zappa stepped into one of the colosseum rings. Out of everyone in Block Two, he was the Seeker I was most curious about.

Keith was a Necromancer, a B-Rank Wizard. With his specialization, he could extract the souls from humans, animals, and beasts, then recreate their power through his own magic. Though the Wizard class was extremely common, Necromancers were decidedly rare. According to the Appraiser Association, the Necromancer's skills had been fully revealed, meaning Keith would've had nothing left to hide. The guy was an enigma. What was his aim? Would I learn more about it here in battle?

"The next match is ready to begin!" Luna announced in a booming voice. "Our second match in Block Two is one you won't want to miss! I've got my eye on Keith Zappa! Can you believe he's a rookie with only one month of Seeker experience under his belt?! And he's already founded his own clan! Don't blink, because we have no idea what kind of fight he's going to show us today!"

"I've got my eye on him too," said Finocchio, nodding. "He's so crafty that he actually hid his identity right up until his match. The Keith Zappa we've seen until now has in fact been a decoy! If he's been hiding all that time, I can't wait to see what he has in store for us."

The conversation between the commentators had electrified the crowd. All eyes were on Keith Zappa and his opponent, a huge Monk.

In the Seven Star Cup, the rules favored front-line Seekers who fought without weapons. Thinking purely in terms of advantages and disadvantages, the Monk was the overwhelming favorite. The Monk himself seemed to recognize this—it was clear that he expected to bury the skinny Necromancer with a single strike.

The next instant, the confidence on the Monk's face suddenly warped into incredible pain. At the very second the bell rang to signify the start of the match, Keith had moved at a speed well beyond what anyone expected of a back-line Seeker, then launched a front kick right at the Monk's stomach. Unable to endure the pain, the Monk's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he conked out.

“I don’t believe it!” Luna said, bewildered. “Keith just kicked a Monk to victory! That kind of destructive power is unheard of in support classes! Is it possible that he’s been hiding his real class and specialization?!”

Finocchio shook his head. “No. He’s a Necromancer, all right. His ability to take out that Monk in a single kick is thanks to a skill from his subclass. I can’t say anything more about *that* because there are still matches left to go, but as one of the tournament organizers, I can assure you there’s been no foul play.”

Unlike Luna, who was a straight commentator, Finocchio knew the two skills each Seeker had chosen for the tournament. If anyone was cheating, it would not escape Finocchio’s attention. That left no room for doubt: Keith was a bona fide Necromancer.

As a competitor myself, I didn’t know what skills Keith had chosen or used, but I couldn’t imagine him being the type to cheat in such a visible way. I had to admit I was surprised, though. Keith’s combat prowess was truly fearsome. Had it not been for the Megalith absorbing damage for the competitors, he might have even kicked that Monk in half.

With the correct skill application, a support class could go head-to-head with a front-liner in a brawl. It was possible, but the kind of power Keith displayed—a one-hit KO—was exceedingly rare. I could understand now if hiding his identity was about hiding his true strength. *Color me impressed.*

Keith continued to perform, taking out each opponent in mere seconds. To top things off, in the last fight of Block Two, Keith knocked his opponent out cold with another front kick, the same way he’d defeated the rest. He outclassed them all.

“And the winner of Block Two is Keith Zappa! A Necromancer with a decimating kick! Am I dreaming?! I can’t be—I’m here! I’m wide awake! Seekers, take note! *This* is the power of the next generation!”

Luna was bursting with praise for Keith’s performance, and the crowd showered him in cheers and applause. It was the first time they had ever seen him, but he’d already cemented himself as a fan favorite. The mysterious wild card of a rookie with terrifying skills had won the crowd’s heart *because* he was so enigmatic.

Keith had founded his clan a month ago, when the Seven Star Cup was first announced. He'd probably decided on this course of action the very moment he'd learned about the tournament.

In other words, Keith had hidden his identity for reasons other than hiding his strengths and abilities. Everything he did was set up to work in his favor. I was intrigued—he'd proven to me that he was more than just a dumb copycat.

"That's quite the, um...frightening expression," someone said, elbowing me in the side.

I peeled my gaze from the ring and looked at Bernadetta, who sat beside me. Her expression was one of blatant fear.

"You looked just like a wild animal for a moment there," she said. "Quite the shock."

"My apologies," I replied, clearing my throat and taking a sip of my wine. "I got a little lost in my work."

Like Keith, I was an open book sometimes. Bernadetta had caught me in the act, so I was a little embarrassed. I had invited her to join me in the VIP lounge. Our relationship wasn't real, but as an organizer of the event and a member of the regalia, I thought it would be strange not to ask her to attend.

"How are you finding the Seven Star Cup?"

"To be honest," she said with a gentle smile, "I don't really enjoy fighting. At the same time, I am very glad that no blood is being spilled. It allows me to enjoy this purely as a competition."

"Well then, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." I rose from my seat and offered Bernadetta a hand. "I'm also delighted you joined me today."

"I'm pleased you thought to invite me out again." Bernadetta took my hand and stood, then took a long look at my face.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Oh, it's nothing. It's just..."

"Yes?"

“Up close like this, your face truly is beautiful.”

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I believe I am the one expected to spout that particular line.”

“I apologize,” said Bernadetta, lowering her head. “I suppose you mustn’t like being called beautiful.”

“I can’t speak for other men, but this face has caused me a great deal of trouble.”

People either looked down on me, underestimated me, or instantly assumed I was gay. But Bernadetta knew nothing of my anguish, and she stifled a giggle.

“Is one’s misfortune really so funny to you?” I demanded.

“I apologize, truly I do. It’s just so rare for one to be so troubled by their own beauty...”

“You are awful, you know that?”

Bernadetta nodded. “Perhaps so. I am a hysteric, after all.”

“That was rude of me,” I said. “I’m a brat like that sometimes—I’ll say whatever pops into my head.”

Another giggle. “Then I suppose that makes us equally terrible.”

“It pains me that I cannot refute your words,” I said.

We looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Bernadetta and I left the colosseum and boarded a carriage bound for her home. Once I saw her off, I would head out to see Finocchio. I was idly gazing out the window when Bernadetta suddenly spoke up.

“I’ve been thinking...”

“About?”

“I don’t think it is right that we’re deceiving my father. Why don’t we take this more seriously?”

That caught me off guard, and my eyes flicked toward her. Her face was red,

and she gripped the fabric of her dress tight in her hands. There was a warmth, a heat, in her eyes.

“Do you not approve?” she asked, looking up at me.

I sighed and looked back out the window. “What put this idea in your head?”

“We get along well. I actually don’t mind being in your company. We’ve argued, I know, but rather than hating it, I found the experience quite refreshing.”

“Refreshing, eh?”

“I’ve never experienced anything quite like that; it’s an entirely unique experience. It made me think that there is value to being upfront about one’s feelings.”

“You find arguments fun? You’re a weird one.”

“But I think that’s exactly it. If you feel something out of the ordinary, doesn’t that make it special?”

In the window’s reflection, I saw Bernadetta clasping her two hands in front of her chest, waiting for me to speak. As I thought about how best to reply, I saw a family outside enjoying a walk. The father carried their young child on his shoulders, and he looked to be happily in love with his wife, who held his hand. The sight warmed my heart even though I had no memories of my own parents.

Perhaps it was not a bad thing to have a family. Even if I only had ten years left, there was still much I could foster and leave behind. Yet when I thought about it, I felt a cold refutation coil around me: *You don’t have the right.*

“Bernadetta,” I said, still looking out the window to avoid meeting her gaze. “You know nothing about me. I am more monstrous than you may even believe.”

“Father did tell me you sold your companions as slaves... But you had good reason to do so, did you not?”

“I am not talking about that. Yes, I sold my companions as slaves, but I have done much evil in my short life. I can make excuses for a lot of it—I had good reason, as you put it. But I carry one particular sin with me that no

rationalization can wipe clean.”

The words that came next hurt more than I had expected.

“I killed a child who adored and looked up to me.”

“I-I... Whatever do you mean?”

“I did not kill her with my own hands, but I knew full well that my decision would result in her suffering. I knew, yet I put myself first anyway. And in the end, she was made to endure great pain before she was killed.”

Back in Mintz Village, when I meted my own punishment out to a village elder who deceived me, I knew what the consequences would be. When you owe money to gangsters and you cannot return it, you pay a different price. It is all too easy to imagine what happened to Chelsea when she landed in the hands of those gangsters. I didn’t think they would kill her, but that didn’t make it right, and it didn’t lessen the depth of my sins.

“That is the kind of man I am,” I went on as Bernadetta sat up straight and faced me. “I will not hesitate to put a child to death if such an act is necessary. I will not regret my decision. Not this time, not the next time, and no matter how many times it happens. I—”

I will kill her.

Bernadetta wrapped me in a hug before I could finish.

“I’m so sorry,” she said earnestly. “I never intended for you to relive such horrible memories.”

“I don’t need you to comfort me. It’s my problem.”

Nodding, Bernadetta buried her head in my chest. “I know. But I don’t know what else to do.”

She did not forgive me my crimes, nor did she denounce me for them. She simply stayed put. I hated to be touched, and the idea of people feeling sympathy for me made me sick. I wanted nothing more than to shove her away, but when I tried...I couldn’t.

Time passed, and Bernadetta held me until we arrived at her home. When the carriage came to a halt, she let go and looked up at me with a kind smile.

“We can talk more about what I said when next we meet,” she said. “I will await your reply.”

Bernadetta made to leave the carriage, but I hated the idea of waiting so long. Perhaps someone else had that kind of patience, but I sure didn't. I grabbed Bernadetta by the shoulders, whirled her around to face me, and kissed her on the lips.

“Mmph?!”



With her lips covered by my own, Bernadetta's eyes grew as wide as saucers, but she made no attempt to push me away. The warmth of our breath mingled between us. She let out a half-pained, half-amorous moan as her body lurched.

How long did we kiss for? When I pulled away at last, Bernadetta looked down bashfully. Her delicate shoulders shook with each ragged breath.

"Is that enough of a reply for you?" I asked.

Still not meeting my eyes, the girl nodded. I smiled gently, then got out of the carriage and walked around to Bernadetta's door. I opened it and offered her my hand.

"Whenever you're ready, Princess."

"Thank you."

Suddenly shy, Bernadetta took my hand and alighted from the carriage. I asked the driver to wait for a moment while I escorted her inside. Though she hadn't yet met my gaze, I bid her farewell and returned to the carriage.

"We're done," I said. "Let's go."

At my command, the carriage rolled away. I lit up a smoke as I watched the scenery breeze past through the window. The smoke was more saccharine than usual, and I didn't think it was just my imagination. The warmth of Bernadetta's kiss still lingered, and I slid my tongue across my lips. A wicked grin grew upon the face in the reflection I saw in the window.

"Awfully sweet," I muttered. "So this is the taste of a lying wench."

The Luciano family's executive meeting took place in a luxurious conference room, and everything started off smoothly. As don of the family, Vito Luciano was the host and sat at the head of the table. The remaining heads of family sat on either side in order of rank from one end to the next.

To the right of the white-haired don was his number two, an elegant man with slicked-back hair whose tuxedo complemented his natural grace. He was Vito's own son and next in line to be don—Alessio Luciano.

Finocchio, who sat at Vito's left and directly across from Alessio, was the organization's number three. He was originally their number five, but when the Gambino family lost its boss and was brought under Finocchio's control, the mad clown was promoted.

The man sitting diagonally right from Finocchio, then, was the *former* number three—now its number four—and he was none too happy at having his position usurped. He glared at Finocchio, his face contorted in hatred. He went by the name Durinn Hammerhead, and he was the only dwarf on the executive board. Like all dwarves, Durinn was a little mountain of muscle with a shaved head and a glorious beard.

Durinn had once been Finocchio's superior—a big brother, essentially. When the young Finocchio was just a street urchin picked up by a second-tier organization under the Luciano family umbrella, Durinn was already a well-known lieutenant.

The two of them were on bad terms at first. As a rookie, Finocchio had it unreasonably rough. Beatings were a daily occurrence, and because the Luciano family had a host of enemy organizations as rivals at the time, Finocchio was forced into what were essentially suicide missions.

However, much to Durinn's chagrin, these missions caused Finocchio's renown to explode over a short period of time. He was the kind of gangster to whom even the heads of family tipped their hats. It was around this time that Finocchio became known as the mad clown. Things came to a head when a particular boss was caught up in a scandal, and Finocchio was sent in by the don himself for the man's head. Murdering a superior was not something taken lightly in the gangster world, but Finocchio did as he was told, thereby winning the trust of the Luciano board.

Unsurprisingly, Finocchio's path had earned him more than his fair share of enemies, and at the top of that list was his former superior, Durinn. When Finocchio killed Durinn's father, the dwarf swore revenge.

However, with the greater Luciano family watching over Finocchio, Durinn was unable to launch a direct attack. His desire for revenge never waned, and he was known to fly into a rage when drinking with his own gang, declaring

openly that he would kill the mad clown. But it was not just the protection of the Luciano family that kept the dwarf in place—at the time, it had also been the pride he took in being of higher rank.

Now that their positions were reversed, Durinn's rage was a dark and murky swamp, one that grew deeper with each passing day. He conspired with others on the board who disliked the clown, and they formed an anti-Finocchio alliance.

Finocchio, meanwhile, could only shake his head and laugh at Durinn's foolish schemes. Whatever the dwarf tried now didn't matter; it was already too late. In Finocchio's eyes, if the dwarf believed in his ability to turn the tables just because he had made a few allies, he might as well believe in the existence of fairies.

Durinn's alliances were hardly toothless, but the danger was most prevalent when Finocchio was alone. Yet now the mad clown had Noel Stollen on his side.

It had been decades since the Luciano family had become the biggest organization in the empire's underworld, and it had weakened in the long years of peace. No matter how many executives came together in collusion, their forces could not touch Finocchio so long as he had an aggressive, militaristic clan at his side—and a regalia member to boot.

The other board members didn't stand a chance, and it was because the odds were skewed so far in his favor that Finocchio hadn't wanted Noel's support. Such a strong ally made victory a simple affair, but how much value was there in an easy win? Finocchio had no desire for a victory unearned, and he knew he should have refused Noel's help. Knowing he couldn't had left him cursing the weakness of his heart, which was oh-so-easily swayed.

"Let us begin," said Vito.

Alessio nodded and scanned the faces of the participants. "If everyone's content to start, we'll be launching right into the agenda," he said in a clear, dignified voice.

The don's son had been made to study royal etiquette since his youth, and he had been raised as the family's successor. There was no doubt that he was suitable for the job. He was around the same age as Finocchio, but unlike the

mad clown—who had clawed his way up from the streets—Alessio was a born ruler. It was his duty to lead and command, and his path was essentially laid out for him.

Finocchio's heart leaped and danced at the thought of pitting his own power against that of Alessio's, yet he had put aside his competitive nature and chosen the path of the man he loved.

"If you don't mind, Alessio, may I have a moment?" asked Finocchio.

A curtain of suspicion fell across Alessio's face. "What is it? Something to discuss?"

"Indeed. Quite the topic, in fact! Most important," said Finocchio, turning to Vito. "Boss, I would like to humbly ask that you retire from your seat at the head of the family and give it to me, Finocchio Barzini."

For a brief second, the conference room seemed to freeze completely. Then it erupted into panic at the realization that the organization's number three had unabashedly asked for the number one spot. Amid the confusion and uproar, Vito gaped at Finocchio.

"I assume you have good reason?" he asked.

Finocchio straightened up in his chair. "Yes, and it's simple. You are already seventy-seven years old. Everyone knows you are still active and an incomparable sage, but it is true that your strength as leader has weakened since your peak. This is what allowed Albert Gambino's rebellious activities to continue."

Though Vito had been the one to make the final decision regarding Albert's purge, the man's fate had been a long time coming. The organization had faced much in the way of losses by leaving Albert unchecked for so long. Anyone close to Vito knew the truth: the don had been so caught up in his loyalty to the Gambino family's past leader that he had been unable to make the cold, calculated decision that was necessary.

"I know you never would have let such a fool run rampant back when I first joined the family," said Finocchio, "but there is still time for things to end as they should. Now is the time for you to step down of your own volition to mark

the end of an illustrious career.”

“And you’re saying that when I’m gone, you’ll take the reins?”

Finocchio nodded, resolute. “I am fully confident that I am most suitable.”

A challenging grin grew upon Vito’s face as he heard the certainty in Finocchio’s voice. “Ah, a bold declaration,” he said. “I’d expect nothing less from the mad clown.”

“Well, you *were* the one who taught me that ‘the character maketh the man.’”

Vito laughed heartily. “That I did. And you have been quite the character since you started with us.”

The don continued to bellow with laughter, then sat back in his chair. He looked out at the executives with a satisfied smile.

“Finocchio speaks the truth. I am old, and my senility has caused you grief. The weight of our family name grows too heavy for my shoulders. It is high time for a change.”

The table broke into hushed discussion the very moment the boss agreed to retire. Nobody knew what was going to happen. Would Finocchio really become the next boss? Everyone in the room was gawking and reeling at the turn of events, but Alessio alone remained calm. He seemed content to watch things unfold. Durinn, on the other hand, stood from his chair, no longer able to contain his rage.

“Boss, seriously, what the hell is this?!”

All eyes flicked to Durinn as he blew up.

“It’s fine if you retire. It ain’t easy for us to watch you torture yourself to keep this thing running. But putting the family in the hands of that heinous gay clown?! The man who killed our own family?! I won’t stand for it!”

“I am the one who ordered it,” said Vito. “It does not eliminate him from candidacy.”

Vito’s words and attitude were hard as stone. Durinn’s face scrunched up in disgust, but he wasn’t done yet.

“Fine. So we put the killing aside. But shouldn’t *we* be the ones to decide who leads us? You said you’re leaving because of your age hampering your decision-making, right? If that’s the case, I think you should leave the matter of your successor to us.”

“I never said that I was making Finocchio the don. But I’ll admit that there *is* some logic to your words, Durinn.” Vito nodded to himself, then looked over at Alessio. “Your thoughts, son?”

“I agree with Durinn. The matter of your successor should be decided on by the entirety of the executive board. That said, there is something I would like to make clear before we do so.” Alessio paused for a moment to stare at Finocchio. “You said that you were most suitable to take the seat at the head of the family, yes? Well, I want to know why.”

Alessio’s tone was defiant, and Finocchio smiled in reply.

“There are two reasons. The first is the astronomical earnings from the Seven Star Cup which, may I remind you all, I manage. I realize we’re scheduled to announce our earnings and the family’s cut—and that *I’m* the reason we haven’t gotten to that yet. Well, let me announce my own earnings here and now. At present, Barzini family profits for the second half of the year come to two hundred billion fil. Based on our predictions, we are expecting to make another eight hundred billion by the end of the Seven Star Cup’s finals. In total, then? One trillion fil.”

The board went silent at the grinning Finocchio’s announcement. Everyone knew that the Seven Star Cup was going to result in huge earnings, but nobody had expected anything so outlandishly high as one trillion fil.

Just holding the tournament wasn’t enough to rake in one trillion. The real source of these earnings came from Finocchio’s gambling promotions for even non-spectators. He’d used his network to spread word across the country and worked closely with newspaper publishers leading up to the event. This was not to mention his PR efforts outside of the empire, which encouraged wealthy foreigners to participate. All of this meant that their projected earnings continued to grow.

“F-filthy liar! One trillion fil?!”

Durinn was livid, his head and hands shaking as he accused Finocchio of lying. It did not have the desired result—it only made it clearer to everyone at the table that Durinn simply didn't want to admit to the truth.

"I assure you I speak true, my dear Durinn," said Finocchio. "And as the rules state, the family gets a 20 percent cut. If I'm lying about this, I'm just digging myself a deep hole of debt."

"Not if you become the boss! Then you can just write off your own losses!"

Finocchio sighed. "Un-be-lievable. Do you really think the board, of all people, can't work out the difference between truth and lies? The only reason you can speak such malarkey is because you refuse to understand what's going on. If anyone on the board is going senile, I daresay it's you."

"The hell?! What do you mean!"

Finocchio let out another deep, pretentious sigh, then turned on Durinn with an ice-cold stare. "I mean exactly what I said. If you were managing the Seven Star Cup, one trillion fil in earnings would be impossible. But *I'm* doing it. I'm saying we're on different levels, you and I."

"You godforsaken...!"

Durinn's rage had turned him bright red, and he heaved breaths like noxious fumes. He looked ready to pounce at Finocchio at any instant. That he held himself back showed he was still clinging to a shred of reason. This disappointed Finocchio, who had hoped he might be able to kill Durinn right here and now and slap a nice cover of "self-defense" on it.

"Durinn, calm down. Now." Alessio's short, sharp order reached the dwarf, who sat down, his still face twisted with fury.

"Well, I see the logic in your first reason," said Alessio, bringing his hands together over his knee. "One trillion fil is truly commendable. It's almost on par with what we made across the entire organization in the first half of the year. As a member of the board, it's certainly enough to make a case for yourself. What's your second reason?"

Alessio never lost his cool, and Finocchio couldn't understand why. Yes, he was the organization's number two, but he appeared entirely unfazed. Had he

somehow caught on to Finocchio's plot? Even if he had, Finocchio knew it was too late to change his strategy now—the clown would have to take his chances and push on.

“To explain the second reason, I'll need a specialist's opinion.”

“A specialist, you say?”

“Yes. I fear that my words alone won't be entirely convincing. Do you mind if I call upon him?”

Alessio considered the question for a moment, then nodded. “Very well. Father, do you mind?”

Vito made a grand show of shrugging his shoulders. “I am already retired. Until a new boss is elected, you can manage the proceedings as you see fit.”

“Understood. Finocchio, you may call your specialist.”

Finocchio sent a flash of magic through his earring—a comms receiver—to transmit a silent message to his specialist outside: “It's me. Everything is ready, so come in. As long as you're with one of my people, security will let you through.”

“Got it. On my way.”

Within five minutes, there was a knock at the door.

“Enter,” said Alessio.

The door opened, and a young man walked in: the clan master of Wild Tempest, Noel Stollen. His black outfit matched his hair perfectly. The board members' jaws dropped as Noel strolled toward the head of the table, where he bowed politely.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Luciano,” he said. “I am Noel Stollen, clan master of Wild Tempest. I believe we were acquainted through Andreas Hooger.”

Noel lifted his head and met Vito's gaze. The don wore a bright smile, but Finocchio knew that there were dark feelings bubbling behind it. In the past, Noel had been in conflict with Hooger Commerce, which was under the protection of the Luciano family. As a result, Hooger Commerce collapsed, and

the Luciano family lost a valuable source of income.

At the same time, Noel was a valued partner. He was also an organizer of the Seven Star Cup. Though Finocchio and Noel's relationship did not go through the don, it made little difference to Vito. Whatever Vito may have felt, he did not let it show on his face—rather, he looked every bit the portrait of the kindly grandfather.

“Ah, so you're the snake,” he said. “Handsome, too, but you don't resemble your grandfather in the slightest. The splitting image of your grandmother, aren't you? Did your grandfather ever tell you about the time she refused my hand?”

“Unfortunately not. He was always secretive about that particular topic.”

Vito chuckled. “I see. In any case, are we to assume you're the specialist Finocchio called for?”

Noel nodded. “Yes. I look forward to speaking with you all.”

“And I look forward to seeing how competent the son of Overdeath is.”

Noel smiled at Vito once more before turning his gaze on the rest of the table. “Let's get straight to the point,” he said. “I'm here to talk to you all about what will happen to the empire after we defeat the Valiant. Namely, how the power structure of the underworld will shift.”

Alessio's brow furrowed. “A shift in the balance of power? What do you mean?”

“Though I do not enjoy having to tell you this, the truth is the truth: at this rate, there is no place for the Luciano family in the new underworld.”

The Stollen boy spoke in a plain and straightforward manner, as if such an outcome were entirely obvious. But the board was not going to stay nearly as calm, not after they'd just been told their extinction was on the horizon. Ire and venom flew across the conference room, filling it with an atmosphere of danger and uncertainty. Durinn, in particular, was especially fiery.

“So you're saying we're going to get weeded out, is that it?! You know who you're talking to, right?! Keep up this lip and I'll crush your skull with my own

hands, you little shit!”

The rest of the board echoed the dwarf’s sentiments, but Noel remained entirely unfazed. He was a clan master in the regalia—gangsters’ attempts at intimidation meant nothing to him.

“Then let me ask you this,” he said. “Do you have the power to beat any of your business rivals?”

“Of course we do! Who among ’em could stand up to us?! Nobody, you idiot!”

“Gangsters, yes... I suppose if we’re speaking strictly among the families, none could hope to defeat you.” Noel smiled coldly. “But what if your rival was a Seeker clan? Could you beat them?”

“Huh?! What’s that s’posed to mean?!” Durinn’s eyes boggled, as did those of all the other board members.

Alessio was the only exception, and he offered a nod. “I know what you’re trying to say, snake. Our future rivals are going to be Seekers turned gangsters.”

“Exactly that,” said Noel.

The don’s son had some real foresight, and he understood the situation Noel was getting at immediately. The same could not be said for the rest of the executive board.

“What the hell are you talking about, brat?!” Durinn barked. “Tell it to me straight!”

The dwarf was essentially admitting to his own stupidity, but he demanded an explanation all the same. Noel glanced at him as if he were no more than an insect.

“Let’s start with the basics then,” Noel said. “On the one side are Seekers, and on the other are gangsters. In my opinion, there is little difference between the two. Neither has governmental authority, but both make their living through violence. Whereas Seekers focus their violence on beasts, gangsters target the weak. This is the only clear difference. In terms of expanding power and influence through the use of this violence, Seekers and gangsters are birds of a feather.”

“So you say, but they’re still different. According to your logic, men and women ain’t much different neither,” spat Durinn. “But they are—you’re a man with a bitch’s face, and as for that gay Finocchio, who even knows what the hell to call him, eh?”

The board chuckled derisively at Durinn’s crude jabs. Noel never flinched. Instead, a frigid and unfeeling smile rose to his face as he spoke once more.

“The fact that you make fun of others to bring attention to yourself is proof that your parents did not love you enough when you were young. Such behavior is usually something to be ashamed of. Given that you haven’t fixed this part of yourself by your age, you must’ve had a horrible upbringing. You have my sympathy.”

“Wh-what the hell?! You little douchebag!”

Durinn exploded at being talked down to, and he rose once more from his chair. Once again, Alessio’s order kept the dwarf under control.

“Control yourself!” he barked. “This is your second warning. There will not be a third!”

The dwarf could not talk back to Alessio, and he growled as he fell once more into an unsatisfied silence.

“As I was saying,” said Noel, entirely undeterred, “there is little difference between Seekers and gangsters. You must be thinking, why haven’t you had to compete with Seekers until now? The answer is simple: it is far too troublesome. Seekers receive more than enough of a reward from slaying beasts, so none of them want to put in the extra effort to go up against gangsters. That’s all it is. But soon, all this will change.”

In an instant, the board was hanging on Noel’s every word.

“Even if the Valiant is defeated handily, we cannot avoid a certain amount of chaos. Amid this upheaval, what was once thought of as a potentially annoying side gig for Seekers will become much more appealing. On top of that, it will be terribly easy for them to step up. Why? Because the underworld and the government won’t be able to grasp control of the situation.”

If the barrier to entry was low, a great many Seeker clans would start taking

on side gigs in addition to their beast-slaying careers. When it came to making a quick buck, forcing easy profits through violence in the underworld would become more appealing than the annoying procedures and formalities of their primary work. If this sort of activity were to spread, it would result in what Alessio had mentioned earlier—Seeker clans turned gangsters.

Having come this far, the executive board realized exactly what kind of crisis they would soon find themselves in. The faces around the table were pale, but Noel was not about to give them time to take it in.

“Judging by your complexions, I see you understand the severity of this. We have seen cases of Seekers going rogue and entering the underworld, but these Seekers were by and large those who could not handle the pace of the industry. Even then, these Seekers have been troublesome, have they not?”

He was right. Even the mad clown Finocchio had been forced to deal with rogue Seekers on his turf. They were eventually disposed of, but not without a fight—and a messy one, considering how strong they were.

“In the near future, it won’t be the rogues you have to deal with but the clans at the top of the food chain. Not just one or two either. Let me ask you all this: could you win in a battle against those clans?”

Not a single person at the table could answer. Everyone avoided Noel’s gaze with an awkward nervousness. However strong the Luciano family once was, they were now far too accustomed to peace, and they lacked both the manpower and willpower to face off against a Seeker clan.

“Now just hang on a second!” blustered Durinn in a panic. “I won’t deny that we’re in some deep shit if Seeker clans become our rivals, but we’ve got the throne backing us!”

Durinn spoke the truth: the Lucianos, rulers of the underworld, had strong ties to the imperial family. Theirs was a relationship of give and take.

“The throne? Do you really believe that such a thing will protect you? If so, there is nothing left to call you but stupid,” said Noel, laughing derisively. “The imperial family is not your friend. They are merely your business partners. If they deem that you are no longer able to control the underworld, they will terminate your relationship. Surely you gangsters, who put so much into your

duty-bound relationships, must know that they alone will not fill your pockets?”

“I-I...” Durinn stammered, but words failed him.

“The ‘gangsterfication’ of Seekers, as it were, is an inevitability,” said Alessio, cutting in. “Will it really influence the balance of power as much as you say, though? In the past, no Seeker clan has been able to intimidate us.”

“The difference between then and now comes down to the numbers. The total number of Seekers has increased over the last ten years, as has their general skill level. While the Luciano family has expanded its influence during that time, its resources have gone into economic power. In terms of fighting power, you’ve grown weak.”

Ten years ago, the Luciano family was strong enough to compete with a Seeker clan—not just in terms of manpower but also combat readiness. But since becoming the key organization in the underworld, the Luciano family put its energy into business pursuits. The family’s strengths, then, were less violent in terms of bloodshed and more violent in terms of capital.

“It’s true,” said Alessio. “We have grown weak...when it comes to battle. We are more powerful financially than we were a decade ago. However low the barrier to entry drops, the Seekers will not be able to easily overturn what we have built. They will be inexperienced, whereas we have spent the last few decades accumulating wealth and influence in our various industries and developing the means to sell our products and businesses.”

“Yeah!” Durinn chimed in. “How’s a rookie Seeker going to manage that?”

The rest of the executive board nodded in agreement, but Noel’s smile did not falter.

“There is a simple way for the inexperienced to succeed when it comes to business: take it wholesale from the opposition. Violence is the answer, and in this case, it solves everything.”

Everyone balked at that. Even Alessio, who had remained cool and calm until now, found himself unable to respond. None of them had expected that a non-gangster like Noel would propose a solution so outright brutal and savage. Only Finocchio understood that this was Noel’s true nature.

“Why are you all so shocked?” asked Noel. “When it comes to power and influence, this tactic is textbook. It is how your own family built its reputation, its power, and its influence when it was up-and-coming.”

Alessio shook his head. “That was a long time ago. The family business is not as simple as it once was. Simply snatching up assets from your opponents does not mean it will all go well.”

“But your opponents are Seekers, and this is how they’ll do it. It’s the fastest method.”

“They will have been ordinary citizens up until that point. Will they have the resolve to see such an action through?”

“They will. When a Seeker puts their mind to something, they see it through, completely and rationally. It is how Seekers are built. In any case,” said Noel, his smile widening as he pointed to himself with both hands, “I am the best example you could find. I am a Seeker, yes, but I stole the rights to the empire’s railway from under Lorelai’s noses, and now I am putting together the biggest event in the empire’s known history. Upcoming Seekers have seen my methods, and there is no doubt that many will copy them.”

The executives were all hit hard by Noel’s persuasive words. It was only natural that up-and-coming Seekers would copy the successes of those who came before them. This was how people flourished. Though it would be impossible to imitate Noel completely, many would look to use similar tactics to earn their own fortunes. They would not hesitate to swipe gangster businesses from their opposition.

Silence fell upon the conference room. Those at the table were now powerless under Noel’s persuasive Talking. Alessio, Durinn, even Vito could say nothing in response. They believed now that everything Noel said was true.

Noel had predicted that things would come to this, but even then, he was giving the perfect performance. Most terrifying of all was that everything seemed destined to fall into place; Noel might have even envisioned exactly this scenario back when he had approached Finocchio about holding the Seven Star Cup. That was the only way to explain how all the pieces fit together so cleanly.

In the quiet of his heart, Finocchio asked the young man a question: *I wonder*

if you remember what you said to me once?

“Finocchio, you will become the head of the Luciano family and control the empire behind the scenes. I will become top tier of the regalia, and I’ll exercise my authority publicly and honorably. If we work together, the empire is all ours.”

During the Hooger incident, Finocchio had threatened to leave Noel and end their partnership, but Noel had won him back by tempting him with the Seven Star Cup. But Noel had not stopped there—he had implored Finocchio to reach for the head of the Luciano family so they could rule over the empire together.

“Decide, Finocchio Barzini. No, mad clown. Do you want to die for the likes of Andreas, or do you want to climb all the way to the top with me? You can only pick one. Now, decide! If you’re a man, then answer me!”

Noel had pushed Finocchio for a decision, and even now, he still remembered the impact of the young man’s words. He was being called a coward by a bratty kid. He felt enraged and vexed in equal measure and, more than anything else, he was ashamed of his own inability to act. His emotions were an utter mess.

On top of all that, he felt a fire in his soul. He believed that, together with this young man, he could reach the top—that was just how bright Noel shined that day.

I knew then that you were the perfect partner for me... But I was wrong. We’re not partners.

“This concludes my opinion as Finocchio’s specialist,” Noel said. “In closing, I would like to pose a question to you all.”

The attendees were already in the palm of Noel’s hand. If this were a play, he would be its lone performer and they his captive audience.

“In the coming age, where Seeker clans turned gangsters battle it out for power, who among you can promise to perform the duties and responsibilities of the head of the Luciano family?”

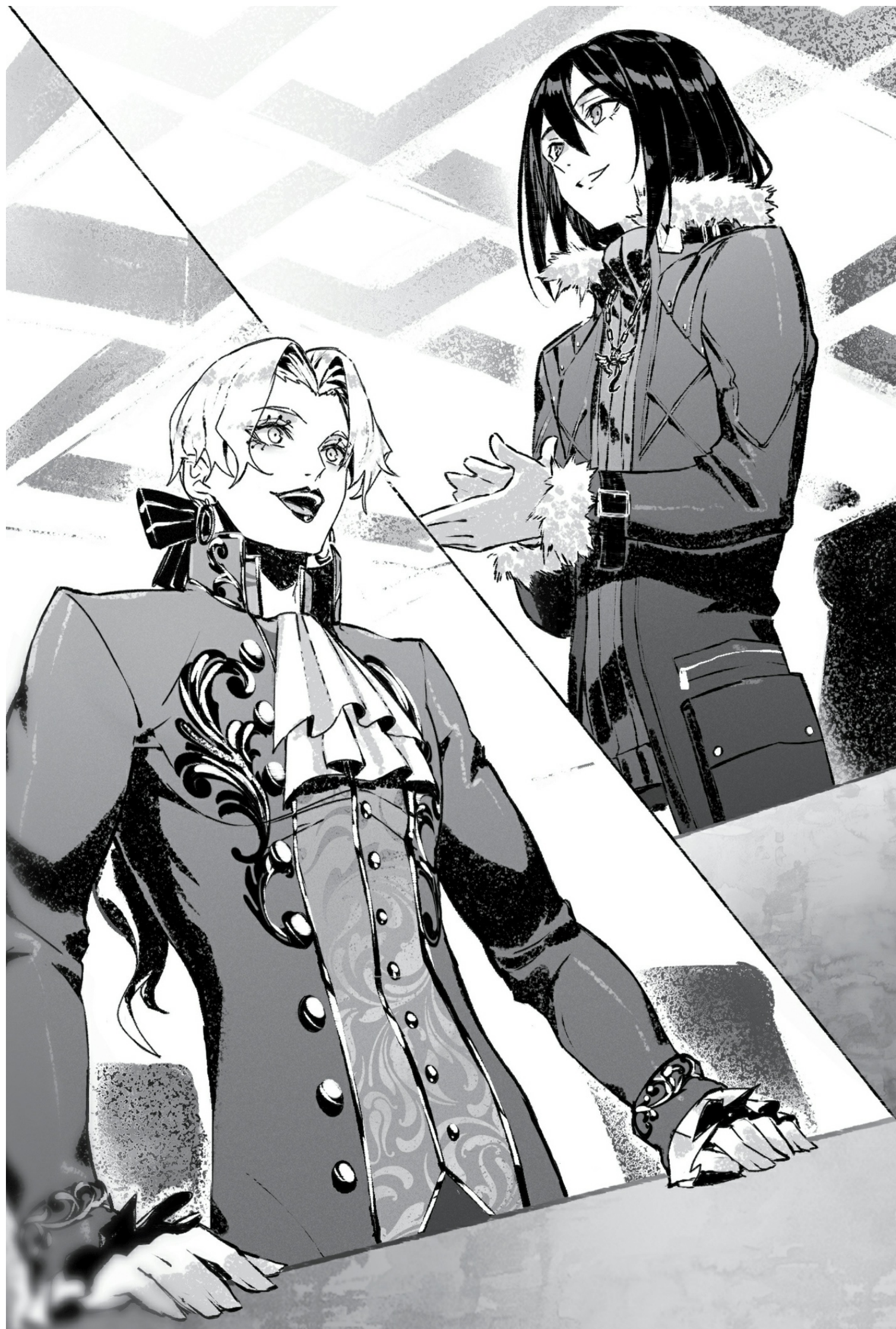
The room remained silent. Durinn, who had been the most vocal of the executive board, had his mouth clamped shut. Even Alessio, the man who many considered the most suitable for the role, said nothing. Everyone knew that

taking the head of this table meant carrying all the responsibilities that were soon to come. In other words, it meant providing the family with the money and power it would need to fight back against the Seeker clans on the horizon.

It seemed none among the board were capable of seeing this task through. However, there was *one* who had experience in battle and strategy as well as a ginormous amount of wealth. He also happened to have connections to an extremely powerful and cunning Seeker.

“I can,” Finocchio declared, rising from his chair. “I can prepare us to fight back against whatever forces may come. And I can lead the Luciano family to even greater heights. Join me, all of you, in our new conquest!”

The words hung in the air for a moment before applause drowned them out. What began as a few claps turned into a sea of cheers as the board heralded its new head of the family.



“Oi! What are you all doing?!” cried Durinn.

It was too late. Even those who had sided with Durinn *against* Finocchio were wrapped up in the celebration. With the sales from the tournament, Finocchio’s battle experience, and Noel’s persuasive message, everyone now knew with absolute clarity who they should follow into the family’s future. None had ears for Durinn now.

“I refuse to accept this!” shouted the dwarf. “I refuse to accept that asshat clown as our boss!”

But Alessio shook his head. “We have no choice,” he said with a smile. “We have lost.” He then offered Finocchio a handshake.

“Looks like a decision has been reached,” said Vito, satisfied. “Our new don: Finocchio Barzini!”

The clapping in the conference room grew louder. Finocchio glanced over at Noel, who smiled as he likewise applauded the decision. For Noel, it was to celebrate the birth of a new “Lord of Shadows,” but for Finocchio, it was different.

I am no lord. And now I am finally able to admit it: Noel, you are the true lord. You are the leader of both the light and the darkness.

To Finocchio, Noel was no longer a partner—he was a leader to whom Finocchio would pledge total loyalty. Finocchio knew that his rise to this position had been entirely Noel’s doing. There was a stark difference between them in terms of their capabilities.

Of course, Finocchio felt some frustration at being beneath the young Talker. But more than that...

“Not bad,” muttered the mad clown, smiling at Noel. “This is not bad at all.”

When the meeting ended and everyone left, only Alessio and Durinn remained in the room, together with their aides.

“That damned gay clown piece of shit,” grunted Durinn, stamping his feet in rage. “Thinks he can look down on *me*?! Alessio, are you really going to accept

this?!”

“Of course not,” said Alessio, lighting a cigar. “But the board has already approved the decision, myself included. You can deny it all you want, but that doesn’t change the fact that Finocchio is the new head of the family.”

“But if we leave him, the world is his!”

“And I am telling you there is nothing we can do.”

Alessio’s expression made it clear the matter was not up for debate. He blew smoke into the air while Durinn stewed in his anger.

“Are you out of your mind, Alessio?! *You* should be the new head of the family! He stole that from you! Don’t you feel humiliated?! Frustrated?!”

“I do, I do.”

“So why—”

“He played the better hand this time. It is better to accept defeat with grace.”

“And where does that grace get us, you idiot?!”

Durinn could no longer hold back his anger. He was so engulfed by it that he couldn’t even maintain his manners toward Alessio—all notions of hierarchy had vanished from his mind.

“I’ve kept my mouth shut and followed orders, but I did all that ’cause I believed that you would be the head of this family! And you’re telling me you approve of that clown?! Is that so?! Well then, you just go right ahead and kiss his ass—hell, he’ll probably like it! I, on the other hand, am going to unleash *everything* I have been holding back until now!”

“You would turn against the head of the family?”

Under the weight of Alessio’s glare, Durinn snorted. “He’s not the head of this family. This is about revenge for my father. I have just cause.”

“You’ve got guts,” said Alessio, “but can you take him?”

“You think I’m scared of a clown? The only reason he’s head is because of that asshat Seeker kid, Noel. Without him, Finocchio would still be under me. He was lucky, nothing more.” An evil grin spread across Durinn’s face. “That’s why I’ll

kill Noel first.”

“Don’t be stupid. You can’t beat the regalia.”

“I’m not targeting the regalia. My sights are set on Noel and Noel alone. Wild Tempest is strong because of its other members. Noel’s just a Talker. He’s weak. I’ll do whatever I want to him.”

Alessio was so dumbfounded by Durinn’s outsized arrogance that he couldn’t even speak. Durinn mistook the silence as a sign of his own victory. His mood suddenly brightened, and he laughed out loud.

“You just sit back and watch! First I’ll kill Noel, then I’ll take Finocchio’s head! And then when I take all his money, *I’ll* be the new head of the family! If you’re willing to kneel before your new boss, I’ll let you keep your spot as my number two. How’s that sound?”

“I’ll consider it.”

“Wonderful! Welp, I’m a busy man with lots to do, so I’ll take my leave!”

Durinn sauntered out with his men in tow. Alessio let out a long sigh, looking tired.

“He used to be so much smarter, but he let his power get to his head. All that arrogance has eaten away what is left of his brain...”

Durinn had once been an extremely capable individual, of this there was no doubt. There was no other way for a dwarf—a demi-human—to climb to such a high rank.

“Time is kind to no one. And Durinn’s time is up.”

“Boss, should we do something about this?” Alessio’s aide asked.

“It’s no business of mine if that dwarf is found floating facedown in a river somewhere.”

“I don’t mean Durinn, sir... I mean Finocchio. Are you sure it’s okay to allow him such a position?”

Alessio could hear the worry in his aide’s voice, and he chuckled. “That’s none of my business either. He said he wanted to do it, so let him try.”

“Be that as it may, sir—”

“Listen, even if he’s head of the family now, there are no perks. It’s going to be chaos in the empire after the battle with the Valiant. Finocchio has simply fallen prey to the whisperings of the snake.”

“The snake? But why?”

“I don’t know, but he probably wants to use the family for some reason or another—and to do that, he needed to trick Finocchio into taking control.”

Although Alessio had no proof, he was certain. The Finocchio whom Alessio knew was unconcerned with rank, so his change of heart had to be the work of someone else.

“He’s a pitiful, pathetic jester. As long as he is onstage, he will be worked to the bone and forced to entertain the crowds. But he will make a wonderful opening act. There is no one better to lead the family through impending chaos. Once he has played his role, the curtains will fall.”

Alessio had not yet given up on becoming head of the family—not by a long shot. He just knew there was no need for him to rush.

“If Finocchio is allowed a chance to cement his position and control the family, won’t that make it more difficult for you to take it?”

Alessio smiled and nodded. “Indeed it will. It would be very difficult with what I have now. That is why, just like Finocchio, I need a partner. And not one merely more powerful than the snake but one with whom I can create a strong bond.”

“A trustworthy partner even stronger than the snake? Does such a person exist?”

“You will see when the time comes.”

Turning away from his aide, Alessio breathed out a mouthful of cigar smoke. He walked toward the window and gazed at the garden, where he had once run around with his beloved pet dog. This, and the Luciano family, was his. He had no plans to hand it over to anyone.

That Durinn was right about one thing, at least...

Finocchio really *had* been lucky; that much was undeniable. He had great fortune to meet and partner with Noel—and this was how he had risen to head of the family so rapidly. But for Alessio, this was no reason to throw tantrums, like Durinn, or lament how unfair things were. Luck was uncertain and unreliable, so Alessio didn't rely on it. He created what he needed, and he did it by his own hand.

Some ten years ago, Alessio had looked for a Seeker to partner with in order to further his position of power. It was not easy finding a worthy Seeker, and there had been a number of problems. Truly powerful Seekers had no reason to partner with a gangster. Alessio could offer them financial support, but it was all too easy to find other sponsors, so they'd all turned him away. Even if he *did* become a sponsor, he would be one among many, and this made the effort pointless. Pledges of loyalty valued between gangsters was a dying art, and it was unlikely that a Seeker would go out of their way to accommodate and support a mere financial sponsor.

Knowing this, Alessio changed tack. If he could not create the desired partnership with existing Seekers, then it was up to him to support the *rise* of such a Seeker—one with whom he could form an unbreakable bond.

Alessio had hidden his identity and approached the Seeker he deemed most suitable—she was young and had an exceptional Seeker record, but she'd been given the cold shoulder within her clan simply for her gender. Unable to find partners with whom she could go independent, she had soured of the Seeker world. Alessio pounced upon these feelings, creating a deep bond with the woman.

In the underworld, manipulating women was a basic art, and Alessio knew all its techniques. He knew that a woman in love will do anything for her man. He did not reveal his position in the underworld until her heart was his. At the time, he already had a wife and child, but he pledged his love to this Seeker all the same. She was enraged, as anyone would be, but she was in so deep that she could no longer let him go.

The woman retired as a Seeker and moved to a villa Alessio had prepared for her on the outskirts of the empire. He met her in secret, and the more they saw each other, the more he ensnared her. Something about passionate, forbidden

love really resonated with women. The couple's deep longing for one another led to the former Seeker bearing Alessio a child—a boy. For most, a child born to a mistress brought with it nothing but suffering and loss, but this was not so for Alessio. It was, in fact, the very reason he'd approached the woman in the first place.

Alessio showed his love child more care and affection than his lawful family. No matter how busy he was, he made time to be there for his son, imparting the Luciano ways of imperial education. The boy's Seeker mother, having understood Alessio's motives, trained her child in all things combat.

With the passage of time, the boy's class turned out to be the same as his mother's. This was common in Seeker bloodlines, especially when both mother and grandmother shared the same class. Everything had gone according to the Appraisal Association's research papers. Alessio had, of course, looked into the woman's lineage long ago; he'd chosen her specifically because of her bloodline.

When the child's class manifested, Alessio pulled out all the stops, giving his son all the necessary knowledge and skills to be a great among Seekers. Thanks to these efforts, his boy began to display prodigious talents above and beyond all expectations.

Alessio was certain that, one day, his son would stand at the peak of the Seeker world. Noel and Finocchio's collusion had taken him by surprise, yes, but this did not disrupt his ongoing plans. He would rule the underworld while his son ruled the surface world. The Seven Star Cup, the Valiant, Finocchio—all of them were simply rungs for him to climb.

However far you manage to go, Finocchio, you will always be nothing more than a clown.

Finocchio and Noel's bond was fleeting. They were ultimately strangers. But Alessio and his son had a bond of blood, and this was absolute.

"The true lord of the darkness isn't you, Finocchio," murmured Alessio resolutely. "It is *me*."

It had been five days since Finocchio was instated as the new head of the Luciano family, and the preliminaries of the Seven Star Cup were over. The tournament continued without issue, and the seven Seekers who'd won each block were set for the finals, which started tomorrow.

Everything was going perfectly—including my relationship with Bernadetta.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

Bernadetta nodded, but she was wincing in pain. "I-I can manage..."

When we left the hotel, the sky was covered in the veil of evening. It was freezing outside, yet Bernadetta was covered in a light sweat. She looked unsteady on her feet, as though she were trying to protect herself from her own pain.

"Don't force yourself," I said. "I have potions on me. Would you like one?"

I couldn't carry my item pouch with a tailcoat on, but I always kept a few potions on hand. Things had been dangerous of late, and I knew it was best to carry my silver flame and items, even if it made me look a bit bulky in my suit. I reached into my coat pocket for a potion, but Bernadetta shook her head.

"I'm fine. I don't need it. I've heard that potions can cause it to hang around longer."

"Seriously? That sounds like hearsay."

"And it may very well be, but I don't like the idea of making this any worse."

I chuckled at the girl. She was incredibly pale, and my attitude seemed to annoy her.

"Must be nice for men," she said with a glare, "not having to worry about the cramps or the mess."

"I've got no comeback for that," I said with a snicker. Then I took a silver pendant from my pocket. "Have this as a token of my apology."

Bernadetta took the pendant with wide eyes. "This is the Wild Tempest clan symbol," she breathed.

The pendant was of a silver winged snake—the clan's mascot.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“I thought it only proper to give you a gift, but I struggled to think of what would be appropriate for a lady like yourself. You were born into a wealthy family—mere jewelry would be unlikely to move you.”

“I’m not a princess of such luxurious tastes, you know.”

“All the same, it would be true to say that most gifts do not surprise you, yes?”

“I suppose...”

“So I decided to give you my most valuable possession: my clan symbol as a member of the regalia.

Bernadetta looked once more at the pendant in her hand. “Are you certain? I’m not a member, after all.”

“No, but think about our future. No one will object to you owning this pendant. I hope you will think of those feelings as you accept this gift.”

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head, and she blushed. “Thank you, Noel,” she said, smiling. “This makes me so happy.”

I nodded and put my hands around Bernadetta’s waist. She embraced me back, and we came together in a passionate kiss. We lingered there until the carriage arrived. A bashful giggle spilled from her lips as I let her go.

“I feel more comfortable than I did at the beginning, but I’m still not used to this.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Liar. I’ve never seen you look flustered in the slightest.”

“It doesn’t show on my face, that’s all. But look, my palms are sweaty.”

I showed her my hands, and Bernadetta laughed. She threaded her delicate fingers in mine.

“They’re dry,” she said. “Why must you lie?”

“What? Don’t you know what the people call me?” I smiled. “They say I’m—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Bernadetta's face stiffened.

"A snake," came a familiar voice from behind us. "And one that strolls around town all lovey-dovey without any bodyguards."

I turned to see Durinn the dwarf flanked by members of his gang, the Hammerhead family. They stared at us with rude, filthy glares.

"There's something I'd like to say to you," said Durinn, gesturing with a hand. "Got a minute?"

I chuckled. "What a surprise. So you *are* capable of casual conversation. I was convinced your skull was filled entirely with shit."

"Shut it, kid! Now get moving!"

At Durinn's roar, Bernadetta clung fearfully to my sleeve. Durinn saw this and grinned at the sight.

"Rest easy, Lady Golding. We're all gentlemen here. We don't intend to harm a single hair on your pretty little head. That said, if the snake doesn't come with us, we may have to...force his hand."

In other words, *do as Durinn says or the girl gets it*. I sighed and pushed Bernadetta gently toward the waiting carriage.

"Go," I told her. "He means business, and he's not afraid of your father."

"But—!"

"It's not like you can fight anyway. I'll be fine. Now go."

She nodded reluctantly, stepping into the carriage. "I'll call for help as soon as I can!"

The driver set off immediately. Once I was sure they were gone, I turned to Durinn and cocked my head to one side.

"So then, where are we going?" I asked.

"Over here! And, uh, be quick about it!"

Durinn was put off by my calm, and he awkwardly ushered me toward an alleyway. His cronies surrounded us, shutting down any attempts at a swift getaway.

Eventually we arrived at a vacant plot of land, where even more of Durinn's men were waiting. These ones were armed. By my quick count, there were thirty of them. Two in particular—elves with very similar faces—had an aura far different from the rest.

They were the Varen brothers, former Seekers turned gangsters. They weren't part of the Hammerhead family, but they were on friendly terms with Durinn. They'd been ousted from their clan some twenty years ago because of their behavior, and now they made their living as guns for hire.

The older brother was a Swordsman and the younger one a Lancer, and both were A-Rank. With their unique teamwork in battle, they'd killed countless humans and beasts alike. Rumor had it they'd murdered their entire clan as revenge for being kicked out. Perhaps the old story was untrue, but one thing was certain—they were *very* dangerous.

Durinn faced me with a murderous smile on his lips. "Guess you regalia types aren't all you're cracked up to be. When my boys told me they saw you in a hotel with a girl and no bodyguards, I didn't believe it. Never would've thought a kid with such a pretty face would be chasing tail, but it looks like it made you dead stupid. Let me guess: your brain was so full of sperm that all you could think about was getting it on?"

The dwarf bellowed with laughter as he thrust his hips, and his men laughed along with him. It even brought a chuckle out of me, but that only pissed him off.

"What's so funny, spermbrian?!" he demanded.

Ignoring him, I took a cigarette and a match from my coat pocket. I sparked up, took a deep drag, and blew the smoke into the air with a smile.

"Y-you human trash, always screwing with me... Enough talk! Time to kill you and send you floating downriver!"

At his shout, Durinn's men readied their weapons and closed in—but they were in for a nasty surprise.

"The hell?!"

Not a single person touched me. Durinn's gang found themselves blocked by

an invisible barrier, and the impact of it sent them flying.

“A barrier?! How does a Seeker like you know that kinda skill?!”

Durinn was completely dumbfounded, and it tickled me so much I had to laugh.

“You make a better entertainer than you do a gangster,” I said. “Surely you can work it out if you give it a little thought.”

“What the hell’re you talking about?!”

“You still don’t get it? All of you were trapped right from the very beginning.”

When I pointed my cigarette at Durinn, a man in white armor with a sword and shield leaped down from the roof of a nearby building, landing right in front of them all. It was Leon, Wild Tempest’s vice-master. He’d cast the barrier blocking Durinn’s men.

“An ambush?! No! That means—”

Durinn finally understood the situation he’d put himself in, but it was already too late. My wicked grin stretched as the screams of Durinn’s men pierced through the air. One lackey was cut open with a knife, while another had his head crushed by a puppet soldier. In the blink of an eye, Durinn’s forces were little more than corpses littering the ground. The only ones who remained were Durinn himself and the Varen brothers.

Alma wore a wicked smile as she circled behind Durinn and his two bodyguards. Hugo joined her, his gaze like ice as the puppet soldiers stood before him.

“I knew you would come for me,” I said, taking a puff. “The way you were raging, it was clear to everyone in the conference room that you couldn’t stand Finocchio becoming head of the family. But if we took the initiative and killed you first, it would only send the wrong message to the rest of the board—that Finocchio intends to rule by fear.”

I relished the pitiful and oh-so-stupid Durinn’s bewilderment.

“I made it easy for you; I made myself the target. You didn’t even give it a second thought—you just jumped right into the trap like it was exactly what

you wanted. From the moment you set your men to tail me, my friends were watching you.”

“B-but that’s just asinine... The boss being the decoy? Are you freaking insane?! It would have been all over if you died! It don’t make sense!”

I sighed. “That’s exactly why you can’t beat Finocchio.”

“Are you saying I’m inferior to that clown?!”

“You haven’t bested him at a single thing.”

Durinn growled through clenched teeth, consumed by his anger and humiliation. The Varen brothers had their weapons at the ready, watching us carefully for any movement.

“Durinn,” said the Swordsman. “You have to make a choice: run or fight.”

“He’s right,” said the Lancer. “Whatever decision you make, it had better be quick.”

“I know, I know! I ain’t going down like this! Let’s get out of here!”

“Got it!”

Durinn took off like a scared rabbit, with the Varen brothers securing him a path away from us.

“Not so fast!” said Alma, unleashing her steel needles.

The Varen brothers quickly cut down her attack with their weapons, and Alma clicked her tongue in frustration before moving in to attack. Sparks flew from a blade moving faster than sound. At the same time, Hugo’s puppet soldiers jumped into the fray to back her up.

“Our team work has really improved,” I said, glancing at Leon beside me. “They can hold their own against the Varen brothers. Pity we’re not here for a teamwork session. Leon, lead them with your barriers to the waiting point.”

“Got it,” said Leon, preparing a skill. “*Holy Shield.*”

Leon’s skill created an invisible barrier around the Varen brothers. Though most commonly used for protection, the skill could also be used to block or redirect. The brothers quickly found themselves pushed back by Hugo and

Alma.

“Their time away from Seeking has dulled their senses. Any current A-Ranker could handle them,” I said, watching things play out.

“They’re strong, but no match for Alma and Hugo,” said Leon, nodding. “Those brothers would be dead already if that’s what we wanted.”

“Yeah, they’re too valuable for a quick death. A-Rank opponents are a rarity. I feel bad for them, but it’s too good a chance to pass up.”

Leon’s barriers and Hugo and Alma’s pressure kept the Varen brothers backing up until they reached the intended area. Then, it was the older brother who noticed first.

“Watch out! Something’s coming!”

The very moment the Swordsman warned his younger brother, a sharp flash gleamed in the darkness—the light of a cruel and beautiful blade. The Swordsman lifted his weapon to block the strike, but it was utterly meaningless.

“Brother!”

The Lancer’s pained scream rang out as his older brother and the blade he held were cut in two before his very eyes. Blood and guts spilled across the ground. No healing skills could save him now.

“Son of a bitch! You killed my brother!”

The Lancer thrust his spear into the darkness to avenge his brother’s loss, but his efforts only opened him up for an attack. Another light flashed through the air, and the Lancer was likewise bisected with one strike.

Durinn yelped in fear. “Th-the Varen brothers! They’re...they’re...!”

The dwarf slumped to his butt in terror, his only protection cut down in seconds. He let out a girlish shriek. The fight was over. Out of the shadows came a Longswordsman with a blade in his hand: Koga. Enduring his training had earned him a rank-up, and it was with this newfound power that he dispatched the Varen brothers.

Koga swung his sword to flick off the excess blood, then slid it back into its sheath with a smooth, well-practiced movement. Finally, he put his hands

together for a moment as he faced the fallen Varen brothers.

“Hate me if you will,” he said, “but I offer a prayer for your souls.”

I watched Koga as he prayed, but I felt the corners of my mouth curl into a grin.

“Amazing. He’s only just ranked up and he can already take out two A-Rankers before even taking a breath. He’s a monster.”

“He did it for you,” said Leon. “Don’t forget that.”

I frowned at his admonishing tone. “You saying I should go ruffle his hair and call him a good boy?”

“If that’s what you think is appropriate, then yes.”

“Hmph. I’ll give him an A for effort. That enough?”

Leon let out a defeated sigh. “Grow up, Noel.”

“Shut up. I am who I am.”

I turned away and sucked on my cigarette. Alma sauntered over toward me, and I could tell by the look on her face that she was mad.

“Noel! What the hell was that?!”

“What is it this time?”

“Nobody said anything to me about you going into a hotel with that girl! Was *that* what you wanted?! You’re going too far!”

Ah, so that’s it, I thought. I chucked my cigarette away and laughed.

“This is stupid. Don’t tell me you’re jealous of her.”

“Of course I am! I deserve a kiss too! C’mon, me too!”

Alma closed her eyes and stood on the tips of her toes, waiting for a kiss. She had no shame. As if to make it more obvious, she puckered up and pointed at her lips. It made me so mad I wanted to slap her, but I quickly decided on a different approach. I couldn’t help wondering if she made fun of me like this because I always waved her off. If that were the case, I knew what I had to do.

“Fine. I’ll give you exactly what you want,” I said.

“Huh?”

I took Alma in my arms and sealed her lips with mine. She wasn't expecting it, and her eyes practically burst out of her skull. Ignoring the fact that she'd gone stiff as a board, I continued to kiss her, and I gradually felt the strength dissipate from her body. Any more than this and she'd probably pass out. I let her go, but it was all she could do just to keep standing.

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“Uh...yes?” she replied with a vague nod, walking away from me with a drunken swagger.

I had a feeling she wouldn't try that again anytime soon. It was incredibly satisfying. Then I noticed the cold glares coming from Hugo and Leon.

“Noel, you are truly the worst,” said Hugo.

“An enemy of all women. You're going to get yourself stabbed.”

I sneered. “If you've got a problem with my methods, *you* deal with her.”

The two men averted their eyes after that. This was *exactly* the reason I couldn't rely on anyone. I sighed and turned my attention to Durinn, who was trying to escape.

“Where might you be going?”

Durinn slowly turned to face me, his face etched with terror.

“The night is still so very, very young,” I said. “There's still so much fun to be had. So. Much. *Fun*.”

“It's over...”

Bernadetta stood at the top of an abandoned building. She had watched the proceedings from afar via her familiar. She hadn't expected Noel to be troubled by a half-wit gangster, but she'd been ready to help if necessary. Not as Bernadetta, of course, but through her familiar.

“Now even Koga is A-Rank.”

Based on what she'd seen, there was no mistaking it; he could not have killed

the Varen brothers so quickly otherwise. This meant that the five key members of Wild Tempest—Noel included—were all A-Rank. They might have lacked numbers compared to other clans, but their position on the regalia was rightfully earned.

She then retrieved the pendant from her pocket. It was the Wild Tempest clan symbol Noel had given her. She stared at the winged snake, both beautiful and ominous, and she fell into thought. That was when it hit her: a way she could use Noel to her own ends. As long as she didn't trip up, everything would go according to plan.

But was it really the best way?

Bernadetta was prepared to sacrifice everything in pursuit of her goal. Everything she'd done was for the sake of her duties—teaming up with Malebolge, spreading her legend through the underworld, assuming the name of the Lord of Flies—yet something felt amiss. She could not put it into words, but when she tried to remember what happened after she became the Lord of Flies, she found herself facing...conflicting memories. It was as if her memories had been overwritten.

“Ow!”

The pain came on suddenly, so sharp she thought her head might split. It was only when she stopped thinking and let go of all thought that the agony subsided.

“Oh? I'm quite sure I was thinking of something important...”

Try as she might, she could not remember. She felt only relief, joy, and a sense of calm at being released from the waves of pain. Unable to think straight, Bernadetta drifted as if in a dream. A portal opened a little ways away from her, and Malebolge emerged from within.

“So *this* is where you've been,” she said, a cheerful smile on her face. “The Rodanian agent has finalized his plans.”

“You came here to tell me that?”

“I did. It's very important, and we both know telepathy runs the risk of interception.”

“True. Well? What would you have me do?”

Malebolge’s face hardened. “As planned, we’ll use the Netherworld’s faithful and your familiar. The Seven Star Cup’s first real day will erupt into large-scale terrorism. Follow the orders on this piece of paper. It details the agent’s plans, the timetable, and other particulars.”

The beast took a slip of paper from between her breasts and passed it to Bernadetta.

“Everything changes with this,” said Malebolge. Just like we hoped for.”

A wicked grin spread across her face, and Bernadetta replied with a vague smile of her own.

Yes, everything would change. And this change was for the best.

“Durinn wasn’t always an idiot, you know.”

I was in the living room of Finocchio’s mansion, listening to him sigh. After shutting down the Hammerhead family’s attack, I had delivered its leader to Luciano family’s new don. It was now Finocchio’s duty to judge the misconduct of his board. Durinn’s sentence had already been decided.

It was just Finocchio and me in the room. I’d sent Leon and the others home.

“Yes, he was a horrid man even back then,” he went on, “but he was a fearless and rugged gangster too. That’s what earned a dwarf like him the trust of the family and, eventually, a seat on the board. For my big brother to end up the way he did, it simply breaks my little princess heart.”

Finocchio’s eyes drooped, and he took a sip of tea. His pinky finger pointed up as he did so. I drank some of my own before nodding in sympathy.

“I know how you feel,” I said. “Nothing more tragic than betrayal by those you put your hopes in.”

“You’ve been through tough times of your own, haven’t you?”

“When I look back on it, I realize it only made me stronger.”

“I wonder if I’ll come to see it the same way someday.”

“You will. It’ll just take time.”

Finocchio giggled. “You’re awfully kind today. You’re getting this big sis all excited.”

I chuckled. “Any more of that kind of talk and you’ll make me sick. This tea will come straight back up.”

The two of us shared a smile. Then an otherworldly shriek snapped through the quiet of the living room.

It was Durinn.

“Stoop! Please, stop it! It hurts, it hurts, it hurrts! Someone save meeeee!”

Durinn was in the basement, where he was...being dealt with. The pain must have been unbearable. I got the feeling he was going to tear his own throat to shreds with his screams. Even with the distance between us and the basement, and all the walls and doors blocking the way, Durinn’s voice reached us clear as day. I could only imagine the excruciating agony.

But that pain was unavoidable—anyone would rather die than be skinned alive.

“Stuffing that dwarf and turning him into a mount, though... You’re even crazier than I imagined. I respect that,” I said.

“Don’t be daft,” Finocchio retorted. “I’m not putting that dirty thing anywhere near my house.” He shuddered with revulsion and waved me off with a hand. “I have a client who collects bodies. They said they’d like a dwarf. He may be disgusting to us, but Durinn *was* a former member of the Luciano family board. He’ll fetch a fine price.” He then changed the subject. “After everything you said, we couldn’t avoid bloodshed.”

“We had good reason. You were made the rightful don, and everyone agreed. Durinn’s attack on me—your advisor—was a clear act of betrayal. I defended myself, as is my right, and you had the right to decide his punishment now that you’re the don. Nobody can say there was any foul play, right?”

“So all of this was as you predicted, right from the start? You are literally the last person I want to make my enemy, Noel.” Finocchio laughed and fell back in

his chair. “That said, we *have* disposed of the most likely threat to my position. With Durinn out of the picture, the rest of the board will fall in line.”

“No, there’s still one looming threat,” I said, my eyes narrowing. “The former don’s son and current number two, Alessio.”

“Alessio? But Alessio agreed with the others to elect me, didn’t he?”

“He did, but at some point he will make a grab for your position.”

“What do you mean?” asked Finocchio, leaning forward.

I lowered my voice and told Finocchio what I’d learned from the Seeker I’d recently encountered: Keith Zappa.

“Based on the circumstances, there’s no doubt—he has some kind of deep tie to Alessio. From the way he reacted to my verbal trap, I’d say he’s an illegitimate son.”

“Now *that’s* a surprise. To think they’d be related by blood... Oh, the information broker you asked me to deal with—that was related to Keith too, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I did my best to manage the brokers, but Keith outplayed me. Defense is a harder game to play than attack. I knew that, but still...” I chuckled to myself. “We have to stay on guard. Alessio is an entirely different ball game. We won’t be able to get rid of him so easily.”

“Even if we *do* get rid of him, we’ll suffer great losses. He’s been doing all the work of the number two with the expectation that he’d be promoted. He knows the family business inside and out, and he’s got a wealth of connections in all of our industries—more than I do, considering I’ve just been promoted. I doubt he’ll make the same mistakes as Durinn.”

“A most terrifying father-son combination. So much to look forward to, don’t you think?”

I laughed, and Finocchio responded with a confident nod. “We’ll show them that the power of our bond outweighs even theirs.”

“And when that time comes, I intend to make sure I’ve got life in me yet.”

A flash of confusion flitted through Finocchio’s eyes. “Noel, my baby Noel,

whatever do you mean?”

“I have ten years left to live,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier.”

Finocchio flew into a panic. “*Ten years?! B-but how?! You tell me right this second!*”

“You know of our battle with Lorelai, and my fight with Johann, yes?” I asked.

“Er, yes... I don’t know all the details, but I heard about it.”

“I pushed myself past my own limits, and in doing so I carved a hefty chunk out of my remaining life span.”

“No...”

“According to the doctor, I have ten years. And that’s only if I don’t put undue stress on my body. That’s if I keep myself in a safe, stable state. If I keep up my work as a Seeker, I’m looking at closer to three years.”

Finocchio listened intently, his face suddenly devoid of emotion as he stared at me. “And there’s really nothing more that can be done?”

“Nothing. This is as good as it gets.”

He was at a loss for words. In fact, he didn’t even *try* to speak. We sat in silence, time ticking by until even Durinn’s screams trailed off and then went completely quiet. Finally, the hint of a smile appeared on Finocchio’s face.

“Noel, I-I always wondered if a day like this would come,” he began. “Of course it would, right? You live your life like a candle burning at both ends. Like a shooting star, lighting up the sky for an instant before it disappears. That’s who you are. I always thought that if you told me something like this, I’d feel nothing... I really believed that.”

A single tear ran down Finocchio’s cheek. The man who was feared as the mad clown, the most powerful gangster in the entire empire, wept so quietly.

“Finocchio, I—”

The clown held up a hand, then covered his face. “Don’t. Not now. Just...not now. I need some time alone. Tomorrow, I’ll be ready to fight again.”

I nodded, then rose to my feet and left the living room without another word.

Finocchio's men accompanied me to the front gates, where I noticed a man I recognized.

"Koga? Is something up?"

The gates opened, and Koga walked toward me. "You need protectin', right? I'll bring ya to your lodging."

"What brought this on all of a sudden?" I asked curiously, but Koga didn't reply. Left with no other choice, I told Finocchio's men I'd be fine and let Koga take over as my bodyguard.

The streetlamps cast a dim glow on the evening streets. Koga said nothing, and I smoked as we walked. I felt no desire to speak. Once the Stardrop Inn came into view, I stopped and turned to Koga.

"Here is fine," I said. "You may leave."

"Gotcha."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you in the finals. Until then." I turned and began to walk away.

"Noel!"

I looked back and met Koga's eyes. He stared at me with a firm, serious expression.

"I don't wanna see you die. Even if it's a short life, I'm gonna be your sword until the end. So promise me that if I win the tournament, you won't do nothin' reckless again."

"Think you can do it?"

"I can! That's what I've been workin' so hard for!"

Koga was a simpleton, but he wasn't a fool. He knew full well that there were no easy fights in the finals. Even then, he believed in himself enough to declare he could win. In the face of that resolve, I—as the clan master of Wild Tempest and his friend—had faith in him too.

"Fine. Then I swear to you, on the name of my grandfather Brandon Stollen. Seize that victory, Koga."

“Yeah! Jus’ watch me!”

Koga grinned and nodded, and I smiled back.

Strong emotions—hopes and desires—made miracles. People carved their names into history as heroes by forcing the kinds of miracles that ordinary people could only dream of. And as for which star in the sky glimmered the brightest of all, among the countless numbers that covered the blanket of night, that answer would soon become clear.

Don’t blink, world. The history of the true Seven Star Cup is about to be written...

Chapter 4:

Noel Stollen

AT LAST, the day of the Seven Star Cup finals had arrived.

Caius watched from a VIP lounge on the top floor of the colosseum, surrounded by his bodyguards. With him was Simon Gregory, leader of the former Society of Assassins; Alma from Wild Tempest; Mace, clan master of Kahn; and Wiseman, clan master of Cave of the Universe.

Noel had stationed Alma there as security, while Mace and Wiseman—who weren't competing—had volunteered to do the same. Although Mace and Wiseman had exceptional battle experience, both had been deemed unsuitable for the position of commander in the coming fight against the Valiant.

The truth of the matter was that the clan masters' leadership skills had been called into question. Mace's clan was made up of purely blood relatives, whereas Wiseman hailed from another nation entirely. Many believed that Mace would put his family first, while Wiseman's foreign heritage brought issues of trust. The two men were aware of their ineligibility, so they passed on fighting for an unattainable position and instead chose to give younger clan members a chance to gain valuable battle experience.

It was for this reason that Supreme Dragon's clan master, Victor Krauser, had also decided not to compete. In his stead was the clan's vice-master, Zeke, and its number three, Sharon. Victor was in the VIP lounge opposite Caius, acting as security for the emperor and other members of the imperial family with the rest of Supreme Dragon.

Caius and the emperor occupied separate rooms was, at least officially, to protect from the imperial line being rendered extinct in a single terrorist attack. However respected and exceptional the Seekers were, if the empire lost its rulers, an invasion by neighboring nations was imminent.

In truth, this was merely a pretext for Caius to distance himself from the rest of his family, whom he hated. He made sure to spend some time with everyone

during the preliminaries to keep up appearances, but he had detested every second of it. Somewhere in his heart, Caius even hoped that all of them—who had forgotten the honor of ruling and were now puppets for bureaucracy—would die in a terrorist attack.

“Ah, looks like the tournament brackets are being announced.”

Mace’s voice roused Caius from his bleak ruminations. The opening ceremony had come to its conclusion, and the tournament staff were readying a spatial projector. The final matchups had already been decided via lottery, but they hadn’t been publicly announced. Everybody waited with bated breath to see who would be facing off against whom. The anticipation grew as an image was projected into the air that could be seen from any angle within the colosseum—it was the full tournament brackets.

The crowd cheered. Caius’s eyes went wide as he looked over the matchups.



“Well now, this *is* a surprise...” Wiseman said, intrigued.

Mace rubbed his jaw and nodded in agreement. “To think my own vice-master is going up against that bratty kid in the first round...”

Kahn’s vice-master was Mace’s eldest son, Charles Kahn. He was a prodigy among Seekers and a regalia vice-master at only twenty years of age. Charles had a gentle, handsome face, and though he had inherited his father’s white hair, the two looked nothing alike. Physical differences aside, he had all of Mace’s strengths as a Seeker.

Charles was an A-Rank Lancer, a Terminator. He wielded a long, thin halberd as if it were an extension of his own body, and he’d been active in battle since the age of just ten. This had made him into a powerful figure among Seekers, and one with twenty-some lord-level beasts under his belt.

No matter the battlefield, Charles’s pure-white armor remained entirely untarnished, as if he were a killing doll—the very reason he was known as the Pristine Massacre.

Talent, strength, experience—in all areas, Charles outmatched Noel. It was a horrible matchup in every way. Even if Noel was to somehow put up a good fight, Charles would not fall to any ordinary Talker.

Caius felt a cold drop of sweat run down his cheek. He had put his faith in Noel and cooperated with the young man. His reputation would be ruined if the Talker faced defeat in the first match of the finals. No matter how successful the event was, it was essential that Noel prove his worth here and now.

“All that talk just to be wiped out in the first match...” Wiseman muttered with a derisive chuckle. “If I were him I would likely kill myself of embarrassment.”

Mace chortled. “I told Charles he should come out at full strength, no matter the opponent. He will not let pride get the better of him. I feel bad for the Talker brat, but that match will end in seconds.”

The two regalia clan masters had already assumed Noel’s defeat. Caius wanted to believe in the Talker—he had supported him this far, after all—but doubt and uncertainty took root in his heart.

“Don’t worry, Your Highness,” whispered Alma beside him, so quietly only he could hear. “Noel will win.”

“What?”

“He is *much* stronger than you think.”

“So I can put my trust in him?”

Caius asked the question with lingering suspicion, but Alma answered only with the hint of a smile. She did not appear to be lying. In any case, now that he had come this far, Caius had no choice but to believe that Noel would emerge victorious. He sat up straight in his chair and laid eyes on the ring below.

“Show me that the power you used to defeat Johann was no mere lie,” he murmured.

In the ring below, the fight between Noel and Charles was about to begin.

“Noel’s mana density check, clear.”

One of the tournament staff had used a small measuring device to check my mana levels, proving that I hadn’t used any buffs prior to the start of the match. The Seven Star Cup rules permitted only two registered skills per competitor, so using any other skill during or before the match was grounds for immediate disqualification. In short, the device helped weed out cheating.

“Here, equip this.”

I was given an armband—my link to the Megalith. As long as I had the band equipped, it would absorb any damage I received in the ring. But if that damage surpassed permissible limits, I would be rendered immobile. This piece of special equipment was the key to the tournament.

After I put on the armband, I looked over at my opponent, Charles Kahn. He still hadn’t finished his mana density check, so one of the female tournament staff was chasing him around.

“Stop moving! Stay still!”

Charles ignored the shouts, choosing instead to strike a variety of poses for

the crowd. His halberd swung all over the place as he did, making the mana check practically impossible. For whatever reason, Charles's cornerman was tossing rose petals in the air around him, making the mana checker even angrier.

"Cool your head, my lovely friend!" said Charles with a laugh. "I would stand still for you if I could, but my fans simply will not allow it! Isn't that right, everyone?"

The colosseum roared with support as Charles blew them a kiss. The women in the crowd were especially passionate, and Charles responded with exaggerated gestures.

"Oh, the tragedy!" he cried. "My path is blocked by an angel! But fear not! For I will overcome the trial set before me!"

Charles once again burst into laughter, much to the frustration of the mana checker.

"I don't care!" the annoyed staffer snapped. "Just stop moving! You'll get disqualified, you know?!"

As I vacantly watched their exchange, my own cornerman came to my side: Leon.

"Guy's not taking you seriously, is he?" Leon asked. "We can't take him lightly, though."

"I know. He's laying it on thick, but he hasn't let his guard down since he saw me. He *is* Kahn's vice-master, after all."

"We have to assume he's already prepared a countermeasure to you-know-what."

I nodded at his quick analysis. My adversaries surely assumed that a Talker like myself had only one path to victory: *Stun Howl*. No matter who my opponent was, I could whip out my silver flame and shoot them in seconds once they were stunned. However, the countermeasure to *Stun Howl* was simple—when someone was hit by a stun debuff, a short window of stun resistance would follow.

The effect could be stacked, too, so take enough hits and you could carry that resistance all the way into the tournament. How? Well, you gained about ten minutes resistance the first time you were hit, thirty minutes the second, and so on up to twenty hours of resistance. Since there were so many classes out there with debuffs like *Stun Howl*, this countermeasure was easy to implement. And because resistance came down to individual constitution, it would not show in a mana density check.

With *Stun Howl* completely nullified, a Talker would be the weakest opponent in the entire tournament. Nobody had any doubts about that...but this made the tournament perfect for proving my worth.

“Noel and Charles are both clear. Please enter the ring.”

The tournament staff escorted me to the entrance.

“Show them your true power,” Leon said, grinning. He raised his fist in solidarity.

I nodded and walked into the ring. Leon had been my training partner for this, and he knew how I would fight.

I don't intend to win the Seven Star Cup, but that doesn't mean I'm going to lose here.

“And we're ready!” Luna shouted, her voice reverberating through the air. “It's time for the Seven Star Cup finals! Match number one of Block A! This one's gonna be good! First we have Kahn's vice-master, Charles Kahn! And his opponent, the organizer of this very tournament, clan master of Wild Tempest, Noel Stollen!”

Luna sounded delirious with excitement, but she pushed on.

“It's a battle between a Lancer, the pinnacle of front-line offense, versus a Talker, the weakest of all buffing classes! Though it may seem like this battle has finished before it's even begun, Noel is no ordinary Talker! He's a one-of-a-kind talent who took his newly founded clan to the regalia in just six months! I literally might *die* from the excitement and anticipation of what this match has in store! Big sis Finocchio, your thoughts on this opening match?”

Finocchio thought for a moment before answering. “The reason many believe

Talkers are the weakest class stems from the fact that they lack a means to defend themselves. This is true even in group combat, but it becomes especially clear in one versus one fights like this. If Noel is somehow able to overcome this obstacle...”

“Yes? Yeees?!”

“Then he will truly stand at the peak of all Seekers.”

The crowd whooped and hollered at Finocchio’s words. Fifty thousand voices bombarded me as I stood in the ring. Even I couldn’t help but feel a rush of excitement, but I took a deep breath so as not to let it show and centered myself. Instantly, my focus was razor-sharp, and I was impervious to the swells of emotion around me.

“My apologies, Noel,” said Charles with a grin, “but I’m not going to go easy on you. Victory is mine, but rest easy—your name will hereby be etched into the legend of my heroic conquests. After all, it is the hero’s duty to carry on his shoulders the names of the fallen!” He ran a hand through his hair as he declared his victory.

“Impressive confidence,” I said with a chuckle. “Maybe there’s a lesson in there for me.”

We took our spots in the ring across from each other, and Luna’s voice grew louder.

“Both competitors are ready! All that’s left now is the bell to start the match! Who among these two beautiful warriors will come out on top?! Let the match...begin!”

The moment the bell rang, Charles launched himself at me with his halberd. There was no windup to his attack, no moment of hesitation—just his weapon coming my way at several times the speed of sound. Right then, I knew he had used two skills: a speed buff and an attack buff.

For a Talker like myself, both defending *and* dodging this attack was difficult. However, I had already expected Charles’s attack well in advance.

Instantaneous Precognition. This was the Talker’s ability to boost their own calculation speeds to the point that they could predict the near future. Charles’s

movements flashed through my mind just before they happened. Thanks to my rank-up to Incantor, my thoughts were even faster now, and time seemed to stop completely as I predicted the future and planned around it.

I immediately noted the timing and arc of Charles's halberd. Naturally, this was not enough. Even if I could see what was going to happen, it was pointless if I couldn't move in time to react. If the attack hit me, I would be launched from the ring. With this in mind, I elected to use an intercepting attack to catch Charles in the midst of his own.

I would stun Charles with an attack he couldn't see *or* avoid. Not *Stun Howl*, but a secret technique that disrupted the semicircular canals in a person's inner ear—in other words, a whistle. Pitched at just the right frequency, the whistle caused a slight wobble in Charles's legs. It would last for less than a second, but that small opening was all I needed to take down my prey.

Charles was like an arrow flying through the air, carried by inertia. His powerful thrust was just slightly off target, but it was still terrifyingly powerful. I dodged his halberd by mere millimeters and stepped forward, letting my body spin as the halberd rushed by me. The force of the missed blow caused me to spin like a top, and I whirled around behind Charles. Then I leaped, letting the centrifugal force carry my elbow directly into the back of Charles's head.

The attack—disrupting balance with a whistle, then spinning toward my opponent's back before breaking their skull with my elbow—was like a vortex in two ways. Firstly, the whistle caused a whirlpool effect in the opponent's ear. Secondly, the footwork had me spinning like a twister. Thus, I had named the attack *Whirling Tide*.

My elbow slammed into the back of Charles's skull. If he hadn't been linked to the Megalith, my elbow would have gone straight through him. But there was no direct damage to the Kahn vice-master, only the simulated damage sent through his brain.

Most of the nerves in one's head were concentrated at the back. A strong, focused attack to the area was nigh impossible to withstand. Charles groaned, then collapsed where he stood. He would not stand up again.

The crowd went so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. In their minds, I

never could have won. Nobody had seen this coming, not even in their wildest dreams.

To remind them all that I had won, I threw my right fist up into the air. However, because of the searing pain running through my entire body, the gesture was somewhat awkward. It was the whiplash from unleashing *Whirling Tide*. It hurt the worst at the point of impact, in my left elbow, and if I wasn't careful, the pain could knock me unconscious. In a real battle, the whiplash would have decimated my elbow entirely.

I opted to grin and bear it, throwing my fist into the air again. It was a wordless victory cry, and the crowd finally understood it for what it was. They exploded into cheers.

"We have a winner!" Luna cried incredulously. "Noel Stollen! The unbelievable has just occurred before our very eyes! The Talker Noel Stollen crushed Charles with a single strike! Is this Noel's true power?! Am I the only one who's lost here?! Big sis, we are going to need a breakdown and we are going to need it—uh, big sis?!"

I turned to the commentary box, where Luna had her head tilted quizzically toward Finocchio. The clown was clapping emphatically, crying as he did so.

"It's only his first match and he went and did that!" Finocchio said.

I grinned, turned on my heel, and left the ring.

"How in the world...?" Wiseman blurted, utterly stupefied. "While they are indeed the same rank, it's ridiculous to think a Talker could take an attack class head on...and without even using a single skill..."

"Let me tell you, my son is no pushover," said Mace, seemingly resigned.

"I am well aware. Charles's opening attack was perfect. It's unbelievable that the snake was able to avoid it. The match happened so quickly I can't be entirely sure, but it looks as if Noel was able to disrupt Charles's inner ear—and thus his balance—to stun him for an instant."

"I arrived at the same conclusion myself," Mace said. "Charles was prepared

for *Stun Howl*, but that brat—no, I should say *Noel's*—attack was not class-related. That was something he'd honed through practice. Nobody could defend themselves against such a sneaky move.”

“Terrifying though it may be, you can't generate an elbow jab that forceful with just a spin. He used *Piercing Fist*.”

“What?!” Mace cried. “You mean the martial art used to crush internal organs? But it comes from your home country! How could Noel have learned it?”

“Don't ask me. I have no idea. The truth of the matter is, there's only a handful of people who can wield it effectively in battle. Noel's martial arts abilities are extraordinary...”

The two clan masters gulped and fell into silence.

After a time, Mace spoke once more. “So it's true—Noel should have been born an attack class.”

“I have to agree. It feels like a cruel twist of fate that he ended up in a different class, but even then he's displayed a strength above and beyond what anyone could have expected.”

“But if he *had* been born an attack class...”

“I don't even want to think about something so frightening.”

Wiseman and Mace were both veterans and incredibly strong in their own right, yet this particular thought left them both pale and silent—the fear was plain on their faces.

“Told you so,” said Alma, grinning at Caius. “I *told* you Noel would win.”

“I see how strong he is now,” the prince replied. “But that's not everything, is it?”

“If you're talking about his skills, he'll show those off in the next match.”

“Against Sharon Valentine...”

The former vice-master of Supreme Dragon wrote the book on modern Seeker development, and she stood head and shoulders above Charles. If

Charles was a hero among Seekers, then Sharon was a hero among heroes. Should Noel find a way to beat her, there was no doubt he'd reach ridiculous heights.

"Noel Stollen," muttered Caius.

Just how high will you rise as a star?

The prince clenched his fist to calm the excitement bubbling up within him. Even then, he could not stop the intense, frightening smile that spread across his face.

Today, the history of the empire will be rewritten.

Of that, Caius was sure.

"How are you feeling?"

I was in one of the locker rooms on the top floor of the colosseum. Leon had just used his healing skills to repair my injuries, and I rose from my chair to check my condition. I still felt a little numb, but that wouldn't impair my mobility.

"Good," I said. "Thanks."

Leon smiled. "It's unfortunate you were matched up with someone so strong in the first round. You won handily this time, but as for the next match..."

"Nothing we can do about the luck of the draw. We won't get anywhere crying about it."

I had beaten Charles in mere seconds, but that was only because my strategy happened to line up perfectly. Charles was legitimately strong, even among those in the finals. That was why I had to give it my all—even if it meant ignoring the strain it put on my body.

"You're up against Sharon Valentine," said Leon. "And now she's seen the way you fight. You won't get her the way you got Charles."

"I know."

"By taking Charles down, you showed the whole world that you're no

ordinary buffer. Isn't that enough? If you put your body under any more strain, it's going to come back to haunt you. You should pull out."

"Yeah."

"The Megalith will absorb any external damage to your body, but it won't absorb any damage caused by the stress you put on yourself. If you try to fight the next match like the last one, there's a good chance you'll come away with aftereffects, no matter how much I heal you."

I nodded, thinking, *I know*.

I didn't just beat Charles because I had better one-on-one skills, I beat him because I pushed my brain past its limits—I overclocked it, essentially.

I'd been the test subject for the Megalith, and I'd experienced all the pain it could give. This gave me the ability to suppress those sensations. A supplementary effect of this was the ability to use my own muscles past their limits. By ignoring the pain signals so I could reach new limits, I placed incredible stress on my body. In that sense, Leon's worry was completely justified.

He sighed at my vague responses. "I guess it doesn't matter what I say, does it? Why did you even say what you did? You don't intend to win, really? Looks to me like you've got your eyes on first place."

"I know when enough is enough," I said with a chuckle. "But this chance is too good to pass up. I want to enjoy it while I've got it. Nothing more than that."

While I didn't intend to win, I wasn't going to go down easy. Ultimate victory was little more than another potential result.

I walked over to the window and waited for the next match to begin. The locker rooms were up just as high up as the VIP lounges, making them excellent spots for watching the bouts. The other competing athletes were likewise standing at the windows of their rooms.

Wolf was in the next match. His opponent was another Seeker who'd made it through the preliminaries. regalia or not, we all knew they were going to put up a hell of a fight.

“Don’t let me down, Wolf,” I muttered. “Not after you challenged me directly.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Leon opened it to find Harold standing there.

“Hello there, Noel,” the old man said. He smiled as he entered the locker room. “A truly splendid victory. After what you showed everyone today, no one will continue to call you a cocky little brat who throws his weight around from behind his friends’ backs.”

“Why, thank you.”

Though much of the public applauded my rise to regalia clan master at such a young age, I still had detractors claiming I’d been blessed with strong teammates. As Harold said, those jeers would stop after what I did to Charles.

“He’s strong, but that doesn’t mean he’s *not* a cocky little brat,” Leon said.

“Hey!” I snapped, glaring in the vice-master’s general direction.

Harold bellowed with laughter. “Well, it wouldn’t be the first time, and it won’t be the last.”

“Did you come here just to talk smack or what, you old fart?”

“Smack?” Harold echoed, wearing a look of mock surprise. “I would *never*. I came here to cheer you on.”

“I have my doubts.”

“I’m also leaving for Turmeghid, and wanted to say goodbye.”

“You’re leaving already? Bit soon, don’t you think?”

Harold’s dispatch to Turmeghid had been decided a long time ago, but I still hadn’t heard anything about an actual departure date.

“I was supposed to leave even earlier, but I managed to have it postponed. I wanted to at least see your first match.”

“I see. Satisfied?”

“Very much so,” Harold answered, smiling. “As expected, you were wonderful. Though I would love to stay around for the finals, it would make me

late for my train, so I'd better take my leave."

Two months had passed since the empire's railway project had resumed. While official use of the railway was still a ways off, Vulcan Industries had received strong financial support from the empire and put that ginormous sum of money to use. Railway lines were already in place connecting the imperial capital to neighboring cities. People involved in the project were permitted to use the railway as part of their test runs, so it was possible to get to Turmeghid in about a half a day.

Harold bowed graciously and left the locker room.

"I sure hope he doesn't get caught up in any trouble," Leon said.

"As far as foreign nations are concerned, even a tiny disturbance in the area could force the arrival of the Valiant. It's a high-priority target."

"That doesn't make an attack inevitable, though, right? The empire knows how important the location is, and security is airtight. A few foreign agents won't easily be able to tackle that kind of defense."

"Not if it's *just* foreign agents, no."

The explosion from a few days prior flitted through my mind. I was absolutely sure that the magic I'd felt in that moment belonged to something inhuman.

"What do you mean?" asked Leon.

I shook my head. "Nothing. Harold's in charge of security, so he'll be fine even in the event of an attack. Besides, if anyone is planning any sort of terrorist attack, *this* would be the place to do it—everybody important to the empire is here."

"Right... Wait, are you saying you set up the Seven Star Cup to create a target for foreign agents? With all the key regalia members here, it would be all too easy to take those same agents down. Wouldn't it, Noel?"

"No comment."

I turned my gaze back to the ring, where the next match was about to start. Wolf and his opponent—Mika Fanfare of the clan Summer Memories—were in the ring, squaring off.

“The second match of Block A is a-go!” Luna shouted.

The bell rang, signaling the start of the match.

“That was...a close one...”

Wolf slumped into a seat in the locker room and let out a sigh of relief.

“Thought I was a goner more than once.”

Wolf’s opponent was a B-Rank Archer, a Hawk Eye. She’d proven her strength by making it to the finals, but Wolf had underestimated her because of her rank. The attack she unleashed on him in that moment of misjudgment almost cost him the match. Somehow, Wolf managed to recover, and though he clawed his way to victory, it had been anyone’s guess who would win. Even now, Wolf’s heart continued to pound in his chest.

“You stupid, mangy stray!” fumed Veronica, Mirage Triad’s vice-master, as she slapped Wolf in the head.

“Ow!”

“You took out an A-Ranker to make it to the finals. How did you get yourself in so much trouble with a B-Ranker?!”

“Shut up! I won, didn’t I?!” Wolf’s eyes teared up as he rubbed the back of his head.

Logan, who was also in the locker room, heaved a sigh of his own. “I thought you would have fixed that bad habit when you became clan master, but you haven’t changed a bit.”

“What bad habit?!”

“Being so arrogant that you don’t actually apply yourself.”

Wolf didn’t have a retort. His two companions shook their heads, exasperated.

“Well, I guess this is as far as he goes,” said Logan.

“Pretty good results, considering it was Wolf,” added Veronica.

“Hey! Quit acting like I’ve already lost!” Wolf snarled, leaping from his chair to point at the others. “I am going to beat Noel! No more being conceited!”

Logan and Veronica’s eyes grew wide.

“*You’re* going to beat Noel?” said Veronica. “You realize he still has to get through Sharon Valentine, right? Now, I’ll be the first to admit that Noel is strong, but he doesn’t stand a chance. You should start preparing to go up against Sharon.”

Wolf shook his head, his gaze resolute. “No. Noel won’t lose.” There was none of the usual playfulness to his tone; Wolf really refused to believe otherwise. His intensity made Veronica flinch.

“Well, I certainly don’t think he’s going to make it easy,” she said.

Logan grinned. “He’s an exceptional martial artist, and he hasn’t even used a skill yet. He won’t go down without one heck of a fight.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Wolf. “And that’s why I’m preparing to fight him next.”

The two men nodded in tandem. Usually the two got along like oil and water, but here they were in complete agreement.

“Ugh, men...” Veronica groaned, shaking her head. She couldn’t deal with them anymore, so she turned to Lycia. “Would you help me out here? Say something to these idiots!”

“Hm? Oh, uh, right...” After a vague nod, Lycia stared off into space without another word.

“She’s utterly useless.”

Wolf saw Veronica’s reaction and replied with a defeated shake of his head.

“She’s been like this ever since she first heard about Noel and Bernadetta,” he said. “She can get it together when she has to, so I made her my cornerman, but leave her alone for one sec and she zones out completely. It’s going to be a *long* time before she goes back to normal.”

Veronica shrugged. “It is what it is. Let’s just leave her for now.”

The two gazed pitifully at Lycia, who was like a puppet with her strings cut.

Then Logan shouted, “Hey! The next match is about to start!”

The third match in Block A pitted Keith Zappa against Blade Flash’s number-one rookie, the Sword King Fiore Liebert. Keith had made it through the preliminaries by knocking each and every one of his opponents unconscious with a front kick, and all eyes were on him to see how he would tackle an A-Rank opponent.

“He’s up against a Sword King,” Wolf said from the window. “And regalia clan Blade Flash’s top attacker to boot. Keith is a back-liner, right? Hard to imagine his hand-to-hand fighting abilities helping him out here.”

Veronica nodded. As the name suggested, Blade Flash was all about swords. More than half the clan’s members were Swordsmen, and even those who weren’t chose to use blades as part of their specializations. The weapon was such an integral part of the clan that even the back-liners were trained in swordsmanship.

The McBain school of swordsmanship was said to be the best in the empire. It boasted a storied, four-century history and had been passed down from one generation to the next. But what made the McBain school leagues ahead of other schools was that it was also suited to back-line classes like Wizards.

In fact, past inheritors of the McBain school of swordsmanship included Wizards and Archers. Through these classes, the school evolved to encompass both short-range and long-range fighting styles. Thus, it became a worthwhile reference even for back-liners outside of the McBain family. Nowadays, it was even a compulsory art at the Seeker Training Academy.

Fiore Liebert was a Sword King who had learned the art through its current master, Arthur, who was said to be the strongest Swordsman in the family’s history. Just imagining his power sent shivers down people’s spines.

Everybody had already counted Keith out of the fight, but the young man wore a confident grin—or rather, a dismissive sneer.

“Does that boy have a death wish?” Veronica asked no one in particular.

Wolf and Logan couldn’t help but chuckle. The effect of Keith’s goading glare

on Fiore was clear as day even from a distance; the Swordsman was furious at being disrespected by someone of lower rank. Fiore could probably picture himself slicing Keith's hateful grin off his face in seconds.

No one could have predicted the way the match ended.

"The winner of Block A's third match," the astounded Luna said after the fact, "is Keith Zappa! Another giant-slaying! A B-Rank Seeker eliminating an A-Ranker! Who imagined we'd see this in the finals?! It's mind-blowing! And what's more..."

She took a deep breath before ramping up her energy levels.

"Keith took victory with a single strike! On *top* of that, he won in exactly the same fashion as Noel Stollen! I don't believe it! Did they study martial arts under the same master?!"

"Of course they didn't," Wolf muttered.

True, Keith had won his match almost move-for-move the way that Noel had. At the very instant the bell rang, the furious Fiore launched a quick attack and Keith's counter mirrored Noel's. He slipped past the slash and spun into a vicious elbow jab, hitting Fiore in the back of head and taking him out of the fight.

But Wolf had never heard of Noel training with any partners or disciples. Keith and Noel hardly looked like blood relatives either, so that seemed out of the question. That got him wondering how Keith had used the very same technique. As the answer dawned upon the members of the Mirage Triad, they found themselves covered in goosebumps.

"That kid stole Noel's move after seeing it *just once*," Wolf said.

Logan was equally appalled. "I don't—I can't believe it. I just don't understand..."

"Because it *is* unbelievable," Veronica said. "Nobody should be able to so easily replicate a technique like that."

Keith didn't have nearly the experience of Wolf, Logan, or Veronica, yet he had shown them a glimpse of his overwhelming potential. That sneak peek

alone had them reeling.

As silence settled over their locker room, the preparations began for Block A's fourth match. This time, Pandemonium clan master Leo Edin was running up against Cave of the Universe's star rookie, Jonnie Yen, a Scout-class Death Apostle.

Though both Pandemonium and Cave of the Universe were on the regalia, the former was third tier while the latter was second tier. When it came to the individual Seekers, Leo was at a superior level—he was one of only three in the entire empire to have attained EX-Rank. Everyone in Mirage Triad knew what frightening power EX-Rankers held. No matter how they thought about it, Leo's victory was assured.

"There's no way we see an upset here, right?" asked Wolf with a tense grin.

Veronica and Logan answered with similar awkward grins of their own.

Leo and Jonnie had both entered the ring. On one side, a Death Apostle. On the other, an EX-Rank War God clad in a lion mask. The match between the two lasted a mere instant.

"We have a winner!" Luna announced from the commentary box. "Masked clan master, Leo Edin! What a frighteningly powerful performance! It's like the heavens cracked open to reveal the gods themselves! To be completely honest, I have no idea what just happened! Big sis Finocchio, can you break it down?"

Luna looked over to Finocchio but was met by silence. The clown was like a statue, frozen with his eyes wide in shock.

"Did either of you catch that?" Wolf asked his clanmates, who shook their heads.

Luna wasn't the only one who'd missed it—so had Wolf, Veronica, Logan, and perhaps everyone else watching. None of them had even been able to see Leo's attack. They didn't know if it was a punch or a kick. All they knew was that the bell had rung to signify the start of the match, and then Jonnie had disappeared from the ring and ended up stuck in the far wall. Everyone knew that Leo's attack did it because they could see its effect on the ring—the shock waves had gouged a straight line through the ring itself, starting from where Leo stood.

The members of Mirage Triad could only gape at the aftermath of it all. They had seen the strength of an EX-Ranker in the battle between Wild Tempest and Lorelai, but it hadn't had nearly this kind of impact. It was all too clear that the innate skill level on display was prodigious.

Leo, with his extraordinary talents, far surpassed them all: Wolf, Veronica, Logan, and Keith. They believed they had the makings of a paragon, yet now they knew there were levels upon levels beyond what they even thought possible.

"Oi," said Logan. "Look up there."

He motioned with his chin to Noel's locker room. Noel was watching the match from the window, but his reaction was entirely different from those of Mirage Triad.

"He's smiling..."

There was a bloodthirsty grin on the Talker's face as he stood with his arms crossed, looking down at Leo. It was like a beast staring down at its prey with fangs bared.

"He sees their insane match and *that's* his reaction?"

Leo was scary, but Noel was utterly terrifying. Wolf felt himself growing pale at the thought. It was the sort of fear that made one dizzy.

"Wolf," said Veronica, her voice snapping him back to reality. Her eyes bore into him as she asked, "Can you really beat him?"

Wolf couldn't answer. Noel had surpassed him, and even then Wolf still saw the Talker as his rival. But the reality of the gap between them felt like it was impossible to breach.

Another long silence settled in the locker room.

Suddenly, Lycia piped up. "I think...I might have come up with a strategy," she said.

Wolf and the others whirled on her in surprise.

"What is it?" he asked her.

“Um, well, hear me out,” she said pensively. “What if, at the start of the match, we...”

By the time she finished explaining her idea, the other members of the clan couldn’t believe what they’d heard.

“Lycia, are you for real?!” Veronica asked.

“She’s right! The hell are you thinking?!” Logan said.

As was evident in their cries, both balked at the idea.

“I know how it sounds,” Lycia replied with a pained smile. “I know it’s not exactly a commendable way to get what we want.”

Then her face hardened. It was the expression she wore when she went into battle.

“But if we go with this plan, it doesn’t even matter what Noel tries to do.”

If Lycia’s strategy was successful, it would almost certainly give Wolf a chance at victory. There was only one big problem.

“I can’t deny it,” said Veronica, “and given Noel’s competitive nature, there’s a good chance he’d be willing to give us a pass on it too.” She pressed a hand to her cheek in thought.

Wolf shook his head. “We can’t think like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lycia’s strategy is worth considering, and your point about Noel is right too. The problem is whether we’re really prepared to go through with this. So here’s the deal.” Wolf scanned the faces in the room before saying, “If we’re gonna do something underhanded, and we think in terms of whether Noel will forgive us for it, then he’s practically giving us the win.”

“So...?”

“If we’re going to do it, we commit, no matter what people say. We have to win, even if that means we get disqualified. We stand in the same ring on the same playing ground as Noel—*that’s* what’s important. We make no excuses,” Wolf said, emphasizing the last sentence. “I’m prepared to go through with it.

But this isn't just *my* decision to make. We stand to lose more even if we win. If you tell me we shouldn't do this, then we won't."

Lycia felt as prepared as he was. Logan and Veronica dropped into thought for a moment, but they eventually gave in.

"Do as you wish," said Logan.

"What he said," Veronica agreed. "The rest of the clan will understand."

"Thank you." Wolf bowed almost apologetically. "If worse comes to worst, I'll own up to whatever happens out there. Just let me win this match."

With Block A's fourth match completed, the next few matches would even out the competitor numbers. The Seven Star Cup had twenty-one competitors, so some competitors had to fight more than others if they hoped to reach the finals. In Block A, this affected Noel, Keith, and Leo. For that reason, Block A's fifth match would be Noel's second match and Sharon's first.

Sharon left her locker room with her cornerman in tow and headed for the ring—the battlefield. Along the way, she thought back on the conversation she'd had with Supreme Dragon's clan master, Victor.

"You want me to enter as the clan's second competitor?"

Victor had called her to his office and asked her to compete in his stead.

"I do. You are far more suitable than me."

Sharon's head tilted, puzzled. "But you're EX-Rank. Nobody is more suitable than you."

"I am old," Victor replied, chuckling. "I am no stronger than an A-Ranker now."

"But—"

He raised a hand to stop her. "I know what you wish to say: as weak as I am, I could still beat most of the competition. Correct?"

Sharon nodded silently.

“But ‘most’ is pointless,” Victor said with a deep sigh, “for I do not wish to lose to anyone at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was at my peak, no Seeker in the empire was stronger than me. You and I accomplished many a great feat back then. The fact of my strength was obvious to anyone. That is why I fear the consequences here and now. Were I to lose, my entire career would seem to me like a farce. This fear grips me. I no longer feel pride in myself as a Seeker...”

“Oh, Victor...”

It pained Sharon to hear him express his own weakness. They’d founded Supreme Dragon together, and it broke her heart that her most trusted companion was sharing his fears.

Victor *was* growing old, but he still outmatched almost all Seekers. In terms of his combat prowess and his leadership, he was still first class. But even then, he could not beat the clock, and his most valuable asset—the heart, which sustained all Seekers—was eroding. Sharon couldn’t comprehend the feeling, given that she was an eternally youthful elf, but she could at least sympathize after fighting alongside him for so long.

“I understand,” she said. “I will enter the Seven Star Cup.”

The memories swirled in Sharon’s mind as she reached the ring. Her opponent, the snake, had already arrived and was undergoing a mana check. For a split second, their eyes met. Noel grinned boldly, and Sharon’s face twisted with hatred. Noel symbolized youth and destruction, whereas she symbolized order and refinement. Theirs was a relationship that could not be. The only thing they shared was their choice of weapons.

Their silver flames hung in their holsters, dripping with the cold aura of death.

With the match preparations complete, Sharon and I stood in the ring, facing off against each other.

“The fifth match in Block A is set to begin!” Luna said. “We’ve got the Incantor, Noel Stollen, versus the Black Shot, Sharon Valentine! Two very different classes using the same weapon! What kind of battle awaits us?! Competitors, fight!”

As soon as the bell rang, I whipped out my silver flame, took aim at Sharon, and fired a Garmr bullet. With a direct hit, the destructive power was sure to cause damage through the Megalith. But just before impact, the bullet veered wildly off course.

“*Anti-missile?!* ” I shouted incredulously.

Anti-missile was a powerful defensive skill unique to Gunners and Archers. It rendered all flying projectiles useless. I hadn’t expected her to pick it, considering that the rules of the Seven Star Cup only allowed two skills per competitor. The skill only worked against projectiles, so it was literally useless against opponents who didn’t use them. Sharon had chosen the skill purely to shut down any enemy dependent on long-range combat.

“I hate you,” Sharon spat. “I will lock you down and finish you off.”

The enmity alight in her eyes was crystal clear, and no sooner had she spoken than I felt danger closing in on me from all directions. Thanks to the precognition I gained when making calculations at high speed, I saw countless Garmr bullets coming at me from every which way, after which I’d be swallowed up in the explosions.

It was the Gunner skill, *Royal Road*. The skill enabled direct hits from anywhere regardless of the distance between shooter and target. But thanks to my precognition, I could see each bullet approaching, so I dodged the whole barrage by the skin of my teeth.

After that, I sprang forward. The force of the magical explosion accelerated my leap as I flew toward Sharon. At the same time, I quickly swung my silver flame. Sharon laughed—she thought I was throwing the weapon at her because I was out of options. If I did that, the gun would have been subject to her *Anti-missile* skill, and she wouldn’t even need to move out of the way.

But I didn’t throw it. My silver flame was now in its holster, and I headed for her empty-handed. This allowed a better snap to my spinning backfist, which

pushed against the air, turning into a bullet of wind before connecting directly with Sharon's face.

"Augh! My eyes!" Sharon cried.

The technique was called *Mayfly*. Sharon had the *Anti-missile* skill in effect, but *Mayfly* was a pure gust of wind, so it passed through her defenses. Although it only had enough force to shunt the opponent's jaw, the shock to a completely defenseless, unsuspecting opponent could blind them momentarily.

Sharon brought her hands to her eyes, giving me time to ready a follow-up attack. I was aiming straight for her heart. If I hit her with a hard punch to the chest, it would cause arrhythmia in her heart, followed by unconsciousness. The Megalith would be of no help to her, and victory would be mine.

I wound up and threw everything I had into a right hook. At that very moment, Sharon—who was supposed to be blinded—opened both her eyes.

"Too bad for you," she said. "I've got artificial eyes."

Well, shit.

Sharon launched a high kick at the side of my head. I managed to block her powerful counter with my left arm, but the Megalith's damage simulation rendered it useless. In a real fight, the bones in it would have been completely shattered.

As I spun through the air from the force of Sharon's kick, I saw bullets flying at me from every direction—*Royal Road* again. I reached out with my right hand and sprang into a backflip, landing on my feet and weaving through the gunfire. I launched into another flip to put more distance between the two of us. Unfortunately, putting distance between myself and a Black Shot only put me deeper in the kill zone.

"Splendid acrobatics. Based on that last technique, you're clearly the better hand-to-hand combatant," said Sharon, whose face then twisted into a cruel sneer. "But you can't defeat me. Haven't you realized? While you've been jumping around like a monkey, I haven't even moved a single step."

She was right. Even when she launched her counter, she never shifted from where she stood.

“And I know the skills you’ve selected for the competition too,” Sharon continued. “I can tell you’ve got limited access to precognition to grasp the situation you’re in—a benefit of your class ability to think at boosted speeds. But there’s no way you could read the direction of my *Royal Road* with your eyes alone. That means you’ve got eyes *elsewhere*. You’re using the *Link* skill to gain the sight of your companions.”

She’d hit the nail on the head. Things were different back when I had the Noble Blood’s powers; here and now, there was no way for me to completely read Sharon’s *Royal Road* attack. As soon as the fight started, I was already connected via *Link* to Alma and Leon, who were watching the match from above. Now that I was A-Rank, I could do more than just communicate through my *Link* skill—I could also gain access to the vision of those I was linked to. As a result, I had three viewpoints guiding me, meaning I could make even more accurate predictions. That was why I could evade *Royal Road*.

“You’re using *Link* and *Stun Howl*,” said Sharon. “Those are the only two skills that will serve you well in this battle. Using your martial arts was a smart idea, but I know what you’re trying to do. It won’t work on me anymore. I have you locked down completely.”

Sharon’s sneer intensified as she used *Royal Road* again. The hail of bullets came straight for me, and I once again used my precognition to weave through them. There had to be a limit to how much ammunition she was carrying, but I would run out of endurance before she ran dry. She didn’t even need to hit me directly; the Garmr bullet explosions would cause chip damage even with near-misses.

After five minutes, I was exhausted. My right leg and left arm were now basically unusable. Sharon laughed at the sight of me hopping around on one leg like a scarecrow.

“You’ve put up a valiant fight,” she said. “But it ends here.”

Sharon was not the type to show off and get conceited. She wasn’t going to lower her defenses or go easy just because my mobility was wrecked, so she activated *Royal Road* again.

I wasn’t taking any chances either.

“Incantor skill: *God Fragments*,” I said. “Let those who live by the sword die by the sword.”

As soon as I uttered the words, Sharon’s silver flame flew from her hands.

“What the—?!”

Her bewilderment made me laugh. “Looks like your gun doesn’t like you anymore.”

She reached for her gun, but it zoomed away from her once more. It was as if the weapon had a mind of its own and no longer wished to obey its master.

“This is a skill, I presume?”

I nodded. “Correct. You’re as sharp and cunning as they come, but you made one error. I didn’t select *Stun Howl* as one of my skills. I selected *Link* and an Incantor skill: *God Fragments*.”

“Incantor skill?! But the Appraiser Association announced that the Incantor was just a support class! A skill with direct effects like this is impossible!”

“Oh, you mean that lie the Appraiser Association told? I paid them to keep the real skills quiet.”

“No. You. Didn’t.”

I grinned. “Getting a public organization like the Appraiser Association to follow my wishes certainly wasn’t cheap, but it was well worth it just to see you fall deep into this trap.”

Sharon ground her teeth as I went on.

“As long as *God Fragments* is active, nobody within its area of effect can use a weapon. It’s a thirty-meter radius with me at the center. These square rings are twenty meters on each side, meaning there’s nowhere to run unless you go out of bounds.”

“Nobody can use weapons?! Even if it’s a form of mind control, it can’t possibly be that strong! There must be some way to resist it!”

“Exactly. That’s why the skill has to be bound. For one, the skill affects the caster as well as the target. I have to stay within ten meters of the target for a

full five minutes before I can activate it.”

“So the area of effect increases based on the binding...”

Some skills had prerequisite conditions for activation. The Punisher skill *Judgment* required the target to refuse the caster’s wishes three times, but the effects were unavoidable. If the caster and target were the same rank, the caster could dig out the target’s heart.

“I understand how the skill works, but...” Regaining her, Sharon put up her fists. “Even without my silver flame, I’m not going to lose to someone who’s on the brink of death.”

“Thought you’d say that. And you’re right, I don’t have a chance as things stand.”

Sharon was put off by the way I agreed with her, and it made her wary. She had a point, though—I couldn’t win with the way things were. That was why I needed to take *God Fragments* to the next stage.

She noticed the change immediately and rushed toward me, but it was far too late.

“Did you really think I’d be so kind as to reveal the entirety of my skill to you? Idiot. I just did that so I could reach the next activation conditions!”

Before Sharon’s fist could reach me, I made a declaration.

“Dispose of your powers. Know that I am the law.”

In the second phase of *God Fragments*, the target in the area of effect lost all their class buffs. They could still use skills, but it sapped a ton of their bodily strength. This skill also affected the caster, but because the Talker only received a boost to their speed of thought, the impact on me wasn’t especially great.

For a Black Shot like Sharon, however, the loss was immense. With her buffs gone, her usual agility disappeared and her attacks were easy to dodge even in my injured state.

“It’s been fun, Sharon Valentine.”

I leaped into the air in time with her punch, caught her arm and neck between my legs, and squeezed tight. It was a triangle choke, a submission hold in which

you used your legs and the opponent's arm to close off their carotid arteries. The hold knocked her out before she even knew it. It didn't even matter how much strength she still had according to the Megalith—with her blood pressure dropping suddenly from the choke, she was out like a light.

I wriggled free from the unconscious Sharon and stood shakily to my feet. And just like in my first match, I faced the crowd and threw my fist into the air. The fifty thousand people in the stands erupted into cheers, all of it showering down upon me.

"So, even Sharon has lost..."

Victor muttered the words from the VIP lounge, where he was acting as security for the royal family. However, there was no real surprise in his face. It was almost as if he had expected this all along. He looked down at the ring, expressionless.

"Unbelievable!" said one of the royals, a young man. "Truly the grandchild of Overdeath! An amazing victory for a buffer. I must say I'm disappointed in Sharon Valentine. She didn't even try until she was already cornered."

The man spoke as if he knew what he was talking about, but he knew nothing. Even then, the other royalty agreed.

"If only she'd given it everything right from the bell," said one.

"She didn't put her defensive skills to good use," said another.

"Is she really all that strong to begin with?"

"I can't help but wonder if she's held in too high regard..."

The comments transitioned into disparaging remarks about Sharon's abilities. Finally, a comment reached Victor's ears that hit a very particular nerve.

"Well, whatever results she may have achieved, she's just an elf. None of them can hold a candle to humans."

The comment was so blatantly discriminatory that Victor shot the group a ferocious glare. The rage was so clear in his eyes that the group shivered and turned away awkwardly.

So this is the reward for those who are defeated.

Victor suppressed a sigh and looked back out the window. Noel, the victor, stood in the center of the ring as the audience heaped him with praise and cheers. Sharon remained on the ground, pitiful and unconscious.

With just one defeat, everything becomes nothing.

But if that were the case, why did Victor fight? If it was a Seeker's duty to keep winning ad infinitum, what could he do with his aging, deteriorating body? When he gazed at his fallen comrade, Victor saw himself. He saw himself eating dirt beside the victor as the stupid and the foolish made light of him. The mere thought of it made him sick to his stomach.

I want power.

Fury surged through him.

I want my power back.

The rage ignited into a black flame, setting him alight from within.

I want the unstoppable power I knew in my youth. I want it back.

And in order to get it...

"I will give everything I have."

Leo's red eyes watched the ring as he waited in his locker room for his next match. In the ring below, Noel raised a fist in triumph.

"So that's the snake," he muttered. "The great successor to Overdeath."

His voice trembled from beneath his mask. The locker room was empty save for the War God himself—he'd ordered everyone to stay out. Leo hated the weak. It disgusted him even to breathe the same air as them. He only cared about the strong.

Leo had entered the tournament after provocation, not because he was actually interested. Until now, he'd felt nothing for Noel Stollen.

But Noel was strong. *Too* strong. And Leo, who was lauded as the strongest Seeker ever, felt that strength burn like a flame within him. It was a strength

that would surpass all.

“Noel Stollen...” Leo said, taking off his mask. “Are you the person I’ve been searching for?”

He pressed his hands against the window, face twisted in a wild and fearsome grin.

Keith Zappa believed the word “genius” had been invented just for him. As far back as he could remember, there was nothing he couldn’t do. He was capable of doing anything and everything better than anyone else. When he started studying math, it was a year before he was solving complex problems that befuddled the experts. When he took up piano, he played with such virtuosity that the empire’s greatest pianists wept.

Indeed, Keith was a jack of all trades. Fate had bestowed upon him every known talent, but what he truly excelled at was the art of Seeking. When his class manifested, he did as his parents told him and began training. By the age of fifteen, he had the skills and know-how equal to that of a first-rate Seeker.

The empire was brimming with Seekers, and many of them had been raised to excel just like Keith. But Keith thought of himself as leagues beyond the other prodigies, and in his confidence were glimmers of his true genius.

For Keith, there was only one exception—one challenge to his ascendance.

“This is one fierce battle! How else can I describe what we’re seeing?!” Luna shouted, her voice booming through the colosseum. “We’ve got Archangel Dolly versus Necromancer Keith! Both are back-line Seekers, yet this fight defies the imagination! Look at those fists fly! And the kicks! Is this not high-level hand-to-hand combat at its finest?! Are we all lost in a dream?! No, I assure you we are experiencing reality! This is as good as back-line Seekers get!”

As soon as the opening bell rang, Dolly and Keith were throwing fists and feet at each other. On one side was a B-Rank Wizard class Necromancer, and on the other, an A-Rank Healer class Archangel. Those who didn’t know the classes well thought them unsuitable for rough-and-tumble scraps. However, both Dolly and Keith had overcome this weakness with various skills.

Necro skill: *Soul Install* broke down the soul of a departed person and carved it into the user's body as a tattoo. The Necromancer gained access to buffs the deceased would've had when they were alive. Keith was using the soul of a distinguished High Monk, so he drew upon their buffs to fight masterfully in close quarters.

Dolly had also boosted her own physical prowess, albeit through different means. The Healer dealt with life and, upon reaching A-Rank, gained more than an improved ability to heal wounds. They could fortify their own bodies to boost their strength.

The two Seekers fought tooth and nail in a heated match. Neither was hit with knockout blows, but their strikes were as good as martial arts could get—both could've stood toe to toe with a close-quarters Seeker. As the crowd got louder in their peaking excitement, Keith and Dolly picked up speed in a back-and-forth game of attack and defense.

Eventually, Keith's movements began to slow even as Dolly moved faster. The skills they had in play required different amounts of magic. Keith was slightly more skilled as a martial artist, but he couldn't keep up the pace. Realizing that he needed to change tactics, Keith weaved under Dolly's kick and took a long backstep, putting distance between them.

"You're as good as I thought," he said, laughing casually. "As adept as a regalia clan master should be. There's no way I can win in a brawl like this. But that's not how you want to win either, is it?"

Dolly tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

"You don't want to put on a boring show, trapping your opponent in the corner and wearing them down. A regalia clan master needs to make a statement against a rookie like me, right? The crowd is starting to lose interest, y'know."

"That's one way of looking at it. Well, what do you propose?"

"I don't like boring matches either, so..." Keith suddenly radiated a vicious aura of death. "I'm going to finish this right here and right now, with everything I've got! *Wild Hunt!*"

In an instant, a countless number of Seekers appeared before Keith. Necro skill: *Wild Hunt* brought the user's tattooed souls to life with magical energy. Keith had summoned thirteen, all battle-hardened A-Rankers. It took time to ready the skill, and it was so exhausting that it left the Necromancer unable to move for a whole day, but it was Keith's one chance at turning the tables against a more powerful opponent.

This was Keith's ace in the hole, and he'd used his time talking to Dolly to charge up for this moment. It went exactly as Keith planned, and now the thirteen fallen soldiers rushed toward Dolly. She could not avoid them. The resurrected warriors closed in, and just as their attacks were about to land, Dolly's lips curled into a grin.

"Killer Joker," she said.

At that moment, a winged monster with the head of a goat appeared behind her. It carried scythes in both hands, the blades of which writhed with eyes and mouths. Keith knew then that Dolly had seen through his strategy—while he prepared to resurrect his army, *she* had readied something even greater.

A scream like a death rattle tore from the monster's throat, and it swung the scythes with incredible force. It cut through Keith's souls like butter, and they fell to pieces before fading into particles of light. The monster then sank into Dolly's shadow, its duty accomplished.

The fight was over. Keith's chest heaved with ragged breaths as Dolly strode toward him, a bewitching smile and a question on her lips.

"Want to keep going?"

"Nope. I've lost."

Keith raised both hands in a sign of surrender, and the bell rang to mark the end of the match.

"We have a winner!" Luna declared. "Dolly Gardner!"

Keith fell back on the floor of the ring, completely and utterly exhausted. "I am...broken..." he muttered.

He lay there waiting for the tournament staff to bring a stretcher. Dolly

looked down at him inquisitively.

“You don’t look at all disappointed that you lost,” she said.

“Oh, I’m disappointed, all right. I knew it was going to be a tall order taking you down. Well, this time, anyway...”

“You cheeky brat. It doesn’t matter how many times you try. The results will never change.”

Dolly turned on her heel, annoyed by Keith’s arrogance.

“Nope,” Keith said as she stepped down from the ring. “Next time, I’ll win.”

The Necromancer chuckled and stared at his right hand. There was a skull symbol there, noticeably different from his tattoos—proof that he’d met the conditions to rank up. Keith had already achieved those conditions before entering the tournament, but he’d made a point of entering as a B-Rank competitor. Fighting tough opposition as a weaker rank only gave him better battle experience, and he knew that his skills had been further polished in this match against Dolly. At the same time, it still wasn’t enough.

Keith looked up, turning his gaze to a person watching him from a locker room far overhead.

“You’re so far away. I still can’t reach you.”

Noel Stollen. The man who had crawled to the peak of the Seeker world without any natural advantages. The only man Keith recognized as a true Seeker.

“All these victories and defeats are just preparation. One day, I *will* beat you.”

He reached up and clenched his fist around empty space, as if clutching a shining star.

The Seven Star Cup finals proceeded smoothly and without any signs of terrorist threats. Block A’s seventh match likewise went off without a hitch, with Leo as the winner. His opponent was Jade Feather of Kingfisher Corps. As with his first match, Leo blasted Jade into unconsciousness in mere seconds.

With the first seven matches done, the stage was set for the semifinals—the first of which pitted Noel against Wolf. Both Seekers carried injuries from their last fights, but they made it out of their locker rooms and into the ring.

“Gotta admit, that’s one hell of a strategy you came up with,” Wolf said with some lingering disbelief. “Are you out for revenge after your heart got broken? Is that what this is?”

He chuckled, but Lycia turned on him with a dark glare. “What did you just say?”

Wolf shrank under her murderous gaze. In that moment, she was far more terrifying than any beast he had ever known.

“Uh, nothing. Nothing at all.”

Lycia let out a deep sigh. “It’s not like I have it in for Noel or anything. In the beginning, we were just acquaintances, really. I didn’t find out about the marriage talks until I saw them in the paper. He didn’t tell me about it himself...”

A wry grin crossed Wolf’s face at the sight of his grumbling cornerman. “Well, he’s a busy man.”

“And a high-ranking one too. He was still on our level not too long ago, and now he’s a clan master on the regalia. *And* he’s the one who put this whole tournament together. He’s practically sitting up there in the clouds now. But...” Lycia paused, looking at Wolf. “That doesn’t mean we just give up. We have to show him our strength.”

“You’re right,” Wolf replied, nodding resolutely. “We do.”

Just then, they heard the cheers of the crowd from the corridor leading to the ring. Noel had already made his entrance. In that moment, it dawned on Wolf that they would actually be locked in combat soon, and his knees trembled. He couldn’t stand it.

“Lycia!” he shouted. “I need you to hit me. I need to get in the zone.”

“Huh? No! Don’t be a weirdo!”

“Hey! Give a guy a hand, would ya?!”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. I’ll do it, but I’m not holding back, you hear?”

The dry *smack* of Lycia’s slap echoed through the corridor. Wolf once more felt the strength of his legs underneath him.

“All right! Let’s do this!”

My body was heavy. My head was dull, and my thoughts were slow. All of it had carried over from my fight against Sharon. Yes, I had won, but my body was failing on me. Leon told me over and over again to pull out and throw in the towel, but here I was standing in the ring. I didn’t need to go this far to see my plan come to fruition. I knew that.

And yet...this opponent was the one man I was *not* going to run from.

Wolf grinned. “Don’t expect me to pull any punches, Noel.”

“Look at you talking big when you’re such a small fry. You’ll be done in seconds.”

“I am going to enjoy cutting you down to size.”

He and I stared each other down.

“Next up we have the Block A semifinals! Our first match pits Incantor Noel against Gladiator Wolf! We got a hot tip: it seems these two Seekers have a history! Who’s going to take victory in this battle of rivals?! Let the match begin!”

The bell rang and I did just as I’d promised, whipping out my silver flame to end the match quickly. Before I could take the shot, however, something caught me off guard.

“An objection?!”

Wolf’s cornerman, Lycia, had raised her hand. It was the sign a cornerman gave when they believed an opponent was cheating—an action that all cornermen were permitted to take. Problem was, objections could only be made before and after a match. Lycia raising her hand here at the start of the match would have no effect. Even then, I wasn’t cheating. I couldn’t work out what was going on, and that was when Lycia turned away from the ring.

“Aah!” she exclaimed. “Feels so good to stretch out these tired muscles!”

Her bold-faced lie shocked me. She had totally raised her hand in objection. Had she realized it was pointless and tried to pass it off as something else? My gears were still spinning when Leon’s voice cut through my thoughts.

“Noel! Watch out!”

I snapped back to reality, my gaze flicking from Lycia to Wolf. Well, more accurately, I redirected the extra vision I had thanks to my *Link* skill. Wolf had both of his swords out and was rushing in to attack.

Lycia’s actions were only meant to distract me. Consequently, my reactions were temporarily delayed. Still, I wasn’t so slow that I couldn’t dodge Wolf’s incoming attack...or so I thought.

Wolf did the unthinkable.

“What the—?!”

Two swords flew straight at me. He had thrown his own weapons! Nonetheless, I could still weave out of danger. I initially thought Wolf had put himself at a disadvantage by losing his weapons, but as I calculated the arc of his swords, I realized that I’d messed up—dodging the blades still put me off balance.

His blades flew out like boomerangs from left and right, and both would collide as they hit me. Evading the swords was simple, but it left me unable to avoid Wolf’s follow-up attack. I could see his movements through *Link*. Usually, I would engage my precognition to avoid both the swords and Wolf’s attack, but because of Lycia’s distraction, I hadn’t been able to use my precognition in time. I had also relied on it far too heavily in my last two matches, which dulled my decision-making skills.

When I finally did engage my precognition, it showed me the consequences of my mistake. I saw myself dodging the swords only to be caught off balance as Wolf’s fist collided with my face. I could see it coming, but there was no time for me to avoid it—and then future and present collided.

Wolf roared as his fist flew into my face. Stars filled my eyes. My consciousness pulsed from the damage, and just staying on my feet proved

challenging. I didn't even have a chance to use the techniques I'd used to conquer my last two opponents. Wolf had planned this—his strategy right from the get-go was to put me in this situation.

His punches rained down on me. I managed to keep my hands up in a guard, but it would only be a matter of time before I was knocked unconscious. All the while, the Megalith was accumulating damage.

Am I going to lose in such a pitiful way? Me?!

I wouldn't allow it.

"You dare underestimate me?!"

I barked the words as I put everything I had into a headbutt. My skull smashed straight into Wolf's nose, stopping his barrage of strikes. I immediately launched into a straight kick, aimed right for Wolf's guts.

Wolf sputtered and grimaced with pain as he flew backward. I tried to keep up the pressure, but I was too far gone—my legs wouldn't move. I took deep breaths, sending much-needed oxygen to my brain while I focused on regaining control of my body.

"Pretty neat trick for a guy like you," I spat, smirking. "I have to hand it to you: you'll do what you have to for a win."

"Shut your trap. You're only talking because you want to buy time to recover."

"Look who's talking. You're doing the same thing."

Unlike me, Wolf didn't have a means of lessening his pain. I was the more badly injured of the two of us, but now that my head was clear, I could move first.

"Let's get back to it, shall we" I said, taking a step forward.

And then it happened.

"You coward! Is that how bad you want to win?! Have you no shame?!"

The crowd had erupted into a shower of abuse. It rained like it might never end, falling upon Wolf and his cornerman, Lycia.

“Shitty elf! You’re as dirty as your race!”

“Fight fair, cowards!”

“Last time I support Mirage Triad!”

“This match should be no contest!”

“Someone disqualify those cheaters!”

“Go home, you wimps! I don’t even want to look at you!”

Fifty thousand voices coalesced into a chant of “go home,” and the two were set to do as they were told. At first, I couldn’t understand it. I was *always* using underhanded methods to get my way, so it took me a little time to comprehend what was going on. From the crowd’s point of view, Wolf and Lycia’s actions occupied a gray zone in the rules.

“Everyone is telling the Mirage Triad members to go home! And I have to admit, Wolf’s surprise attack might *indeed* run contrary to the rules!” said Luna, turning to Finocchio for answers. “Big sis, your thoughts?”

Finocchio chose his words carefully. “I *do* think it was meant to provoke a misunderstanding.”

“So will Wolf really find himself disqualified?”

“Well, it would seem the crowd certainly favors that idea...” Finocchio’s eyes wandered to the ring, where they met mine. He was letting me make the call.

I’d already made up my mind. The two members of the Mirage Triad knew they might sully their reputations, but they had set their sights on defeating me anyway. There was no ill will in their actions. Rather, I thought them commendable. I chuckled to myself, then raised my voice to address the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen! A moment, if I may!”

The sounds of the crowd slowly died down until all that could be heard were occasional whispers and murmurs.

“As a Seeker competing in the Seven Star Cup, and as one of the tournament’s organizers, I ask that you forgive Wolf and his cornerman for this particular match!”

An excited clamor rose up in the audience, but I spoke up before they got out of hand.

“Yes, what Wolf did in this match is, as far as the rules are concerned, not allowed. Disqualifying him would be easy. However, this tournament is not purely a competition to decide winners and losers—it is also to show you what our Seeker competitors are capable of. Tactics and strategies that would be deemed cheating or cowardly in a one-on-one match are just smarts when it comes to hunting beasts and therefore of value to everyone. For this reason, I deem that Wolf acted based on core Seeker ideologies.”

I could see that I’d persuaded most of the spectators. Some still had their heads tilted in puzzlement, but if an organizer deemed it so, there was little else that could be done.

“For the sake of fair play, such behavior will not be permitted after this match. I ask only that you make a compromise for us this one time. I ask this because Wolf is among my rivals, and I don’t want anything getting in our way.”

The crowd was abuzz at my open declaration of rivalry.

“Noel...” Wolf muttered, moved.

“The crowds love a good story,” I said. “Nothing will interrupt us now.”

Break time was over. I chucked my silver flame out of the ring and motioned to Wolf with a hand.

“Bring it, Wolf. Time to know your place.”

“Then you’d better be ready for me!”

Neither of us had our weapons. We would prove our strength to one another with our fists and our fists alone. That was the kind of fight this was.

“He’s not waking up. Are you sure he’s okay?”

“I used my healing skills, but look at how he fought... He pushed way past his limits.”

“But isn’t it bad if he just doesn’t wake up?”

“Hm... Well, let’s at least try the smelling salts first.”

“Let me give him a wake-up kiss.”

“Stop that! No! *I’m* the one who’ll have to suffer his wrath later!”

“But he’s so adorable when he’s sleeping. Wakey wakey, beautiful! Mwah!”

“I am no longer taking part in this!”

I woke to a racket and opened my eyes to see Alma’s face right before me. Without batting an eyelid, I smacked her in the nose with the palm of my hand.

“Ow!” cried Alma, clutching her nose. “What the heck?!”

I ignored her and sat up from the bench I’d been lying on. Last I knew, I was fighting in the ring, but now I was in the locker room.

“Damn, my head’s still foggy... Did I pass out?”

Leon flashed me a troubled smile. “In the fight with Wolf, yeah.”

He went on to explain that Wolf and I had duked it out until we’d both fallen unconscious—a double KO. In the end, there was no victor.



“The crowd went absolutely wild,” Leon continued. “After a match like that, Wolf pretty much righted the reputation of his clan. If that was what you were planning from the start, you really are one hell of a tactician.”

“Wolf is different from me. He wins hearts by surpassing people’s expectations.”

That was exactly why I could call the man my rival.

“Caius was angrier than you can believe,” said Alma, cringing. “He feels like you built up his expectations and dashed them in a single match.”

I laughed. “Put you in a tough spot, huh?”

“It wasn’t like I could go telling him about our plan.” Alma sighed. “I just had to laugh it off. Guy practically chased me out of the VIP room and told me to piss off. I swear, that shithead prince is gonna get his...”

That explained why Alma was here in the locker room instead of acting as bodyguard for Caius.

“Caius will understand the bigger picture when it all comes together. For now, leave him be.” I stood up and walked to the locker room window. “What match are we up to?”

“Block B, fifth match,” said Alma.

“Koga’s up next,” added Leon.

I spun to face Leon and Alma. “I’ve been out that long?!”

“There haven’t been that many actual matches, so things have moved quickly,” said Leon.

He put a copy of the tournament bracket on the table, which had the results written on it:

Block A Semifinal, Match One: No victor.

Block A Semifinal, Match Two: Pandemonium’s Leo Edin wins by bye.

Block A Finalist: Leo Edin.

Block B, Match One: Blade Flash's Arthur McBain wins.

Block B, Match Two: Cave of the Universe's Lei Su wins.

Block B, Match Three: Fairy Garden's Fran Cottingley wins by bye.

Block B, Match Four: Supreme Dragon's Zeke Feinstein wins.

"After you and Wolf were done, Dolly pulled out of her semifinal match," said Leon.

"She did?"

"Something about urgent business. The other competitor from her clan, Kaspar, also pulled out. That's why there were less matches than scheduled."

If Goat Dinner pulled out of the tournament as an entire clan, it probably meant that Dolly had gone after the Netherworld Faith, who must've been up to something.

"So Leo made it to the finals without having to fight any further matches, and the tournament moved on to Block B."

"And Koga is up next..."

I looked back at the ring. The match preparations were done, and both Seekers were facing off. Koga was up against Arthur McBain, master of third-tier regalia clan Blade Flash. Even though Koga had made it to A-Rank, Arthur was a bad matchup for him. His chances were less than 10 percent.

And yet...

"Show me your spirit, Koga," I whispered, lighting up a cigarette.

"There are only a few matches left here in the Seven Star Cup finals!" Luna told the crowd. "In the fifth match of Block B, we have Braver Arthur McBain versus Futsumitama Koga!"

Koga was taken back to his gladiatorial days as the commentary and cheers

roared in his ears. He'd never wanted to hurt anyone, let alone fight. But as a gladiator, he didn't have freedom to refuse. If he'd had his way, he would've put down his sword for good.

"Yet I dragged my sorry self out here anyway..."

He chuckled in self-derision. The path he had chosen was to be the blade for the man he cared for. He didn't fear or regret his decision; he felt only duty and loyalty.

Behind Koga was his cornerman, Hugo. He turned to look at the resolute Puppeteer standing at the edge of the ring.

"You know what to do, Koga."

"I know. I've got this."

The Longswordsmen flashed a grin before turning back to face his opponent: Arthur McBain. A calm look graced the man's face. Both warriors were A-Rank, but Arthur was levels beyond Koga. In a straight fight, Koga wouldn't stand a chance—this was evident in the results of Arthur's last match.

Block B's first match was between Arthur and Pandemonium's Sumika Clare. Sumika's physical prowess surpassed that of humans because of her Karura blood, and she herself was an A-Rank Seeker—a Sword Specialist. Though she lacked a storied career like Arthur's, Koga still assumed she would put up a good fight. Instead, she fared no better than a child. The Braver dispatched of her without even using a single skill.

"Considering Arthur's strength, it does not matter if he is fighting an A-Rank Karura," Hugo had said during the match. "He is the embodiment of four hundred years of history, the finest product the McBain school of swordsmanship has ever known. Theirs is the strongest martial art in the empire. When I was a Seeker for hire, McBain recruited me to fight alongside him, and it was then that I saw his style up close. He is nothing short of demonic. You are strong, Koga, but you cannot hope to defeat him."

"Still, I—"

"I know. You want to win for Noel, right? Then use this."

Hugo's hand glowed. In it appeared a shortsword—a wakizashi. Hugo had used his Puppeteer skill to create it.

“This may allow you to defeat Arthur,” said Hugo. “So listen carefully...”

Koga thought back to the wakizashi Hugo had entrusted him with. He looked at Arthur, with his two longswords strapped to his back. The man was an A-Rank Swordsman. He was a Braver, which was the same rank as a Paladin. Though Bravers lacked the Paladin's defensive abilities, they made up for it with a host of support skills and were an excellent front-line class.

Meanwhile, Koga was a Futsumitama. In his hometown of Thunderhand Island, “futsu” was the sound of a sword slicing through the air. “Mitama” meant “the soul.” Compared to the Braver, which was a pure attack subclass of the same rank, the Futsumitama could cause intermittent damage with traps or skills with delayed triggers.

In a one-on-one fight, the Futsumitama had a slight advantage over the Braver. But Arthur McBain's swordsmanship would not be surmounted so easily.

“The two swordsmen face off!” Luna shouted. “Who has the sharper blade? Let the battle commence!”

Arthur unsheathed his swords as the bell rang and instantly closed in on Koga. Responding smoothly, Koga brought his main sword—his honzashi—into play, swinging it to intercept Arthur's onslaught. Sparks flew between them as the metal of their blades clashed. Screeches and clangs filled the air as the swords met again and again in the blink of an eye.

Surprisingly, in the battle between a dual-wielder and a two-hander, Koga came out on top. Dual-wielders sacrificed speed and weight to increase their offensive power, so Koga had the upper hand in their initial clash. However, Arthur's movements grew quicker and heavier with each attack.

“I'm only going to get faster,” said Arthur, “so you'd better keep up.”

Until now, Arthur's expression had been like stone, but now he let a grin slip across his face. True to his word, the speed of his attacks increased, as did their force.

Koga grunted under the pressure. Arthur had total mastery of his dual blades, and even now each swing had the equivalent of Koga's full power behind it. Koga was seeing double, but the difference went beyond strength—Arthur was exceptional when it came to putting the weight of his weapons in each blow.

“Time for a sword that cuts through the sky!” Koga shouted.
“*Amenohabakiri!*”

Unable to parry all of Arthur's strikes, Koga unleashed one of his tournament skills. Futsumitama skill: *Amenohabakiri* was an upgraded version of *Secret Swordsmanship Tsubame Gaeshi*, which allowed his slashes to be fixed in space. The upgraded version was more powerful and could track his opponent. The fixed slashes morphed into actual swords, attacking Arthur from every angle.

“Hmph. This is no good,” Arthur muttered.

The Braver cut down each and every one of Koga's skill attacks. No matter how powerful or numerous, Koga's flying swords lacked the ability to feint, making them little more than a gentle breeze before Arthur's swordsmanship. But Koga had known that from the start.

“I channel the spirit of the gods through my blade—*Amenomurakumo!*”

Futsumitama skill: *Amenomurakumo* was an attack proportional to the amount of magical energy the user poured into their blade. When this attack hit, the user's magical energy flowed into the target, destroying them from the inside. It was, essentially, a one-hit kill. Koga had used his first attack, *Amenohabakiri*, as a smokescreen to get to Arthur's blind spot. His blade flashed sideways.

“Now that's more like it!”

Arthur easily leaped over the attack and launched a spinning kick of his own. Koga took the hit square in the face and went flying backward. Struggling to stay conscious, he whirled in the air and landed on his feet, ready for Arthur's follow-up attack. But Arthur hadn't moved; he just stood in front of Koga with a broad, confident grin.

“What're you up to?” Koga asked warily.

“Have you heard about our regalia meeting?” Arthur replied, his expression

softening. “I may stand in opposition to Noel, but I bear him no ill will. It was merely my duty on behalf of Victor. I am indebted to him.”

“Huh? What’re you talkin’ about?”

“I am drawn to the strong, especially young and raw talent. Potential in need of polish. I knew it the moment we crossed swords, Koga—you have so much room to grow. Through our battle, you will reach new heights. You have earned the right to learn from me.”

Arthur was treating this match like a private lesson for a new student. Koga had been vaguely aware of it at the start, but now it was crystal clear that Arthur wasn’t taking him seriously. No, it was more than that—he didn’t even see Koga as a threat. Based on the difference in their strength, Koga should’ve seen this coming, but it still pissed him off.

“I ’preciate the offer, but I’ve got a mentor already.”

Koga jerked a thumb behind him to where Hugo was standing—the very man responsible for Koga reaching A-Rank.

“I understand, Koga. Prepare for me to go all-out. This time, I am coming to kill you.”

During Wild Tempest’s expedition, Koga had been unable to push past his limits, no matter what he did. That was when Hugo’s eyes filled with murder. Leon had tried to stop the Puppet Master, but it was useless.

“The door to potential will not open unless you reach the precipice of life and death,” Hugo had said then. “If you fear for your life, leave this session and the clan entirely. Doing so would be as much for you as it would for us. But you need not worry, Koga—even if you leave, we will still support Noel.”

Koga could not remember what happened that night, but he knew he had not run. He’d squared off against Hugo at the Puppet Master’s full strength, and he had succeeded in pushing him back. As a result, he earned the right to rank up.

“Never forget, Koga: you beat me, and you did it on your own.”

Hugo had given Koga everything, and that was how Koga could now stand before Arthur. Defeat was not an option. He was determined to win.

“What are you doing?” Arthur asked him.

As Koga unsheathed the wakizashi shortsword that Hugo had given him, Arthur’s smile disappeared. It melted further into a frown when Koga took on a dual-blade stance.

“My oh my! Koga has unveiled a second sword!” Luna said. “Does that mean he’s getting serious?! Even Arthur looks worried!”

The crowd roared, but Arthur’s opinion of Koga had yet to sway.

“Your bluff is a fool’s game. You cannot win,” he said. “You know the weaknesses of the dual-blade style. You have erred, Koga. You have erred, and you will learn nothing from this match.”

But Koga didn’t listen. Didn’t move. He remained in his stance with his two swords at the ready.

Arthur sighed. “Why don’t you understand? You’re just like Noel. Why must you live so recklessly? If you slow down and take the time to learn, you will be rewarded with strength. Why are you driven to move so fast? To hurry? I will only say it one more time. Go back to your two-handed—”

“Enough talk. Are we fighting or not?”

A moment of silence fell between the swordsmen. The emotion drained from Arthur’s face, leaving only a cruel and murderous gaze.

“Fine. You have proven yourself no longer worthy of my attention.”

In an instant, flames flew above the ring. They burned without any fuel—proof that Arthur had just used a skill.

“*Flame Hazard*,” he said. “Whatever I cut will burn endlessly, even the very space around us. There is no defending against it!”

Arthur surged at Koga so fast, he barely made a sound. It was the fastest he’d moved since the match started. Koga just managed to escape and attempted a counterattack, which was parried in a flash. The change from a one-sword style to dual blades had slowed Koga down. Each attack revealed an opening, and the

match quickly turned one-sided, with Koga stuck on defense. The air burned around him, and Koga felt his fortitude slipping away. He couldn't breathe. The heat was intense, and the flames ate up precious oxygen.

Then Koga realized something else.

"These flames feed on magical energy?!"

Flame Hazard was stealing his magical energy, exhausting him more with each blow. Arthur, however, still looked fresh and energetic. His attacks picked up speed. Koga felt himself slipping ever closer to the limits of his own endurance. Immediately after, his legs buckled.

"It ends here!" Arthur roared, swinging down his swords.

Koga couldn't dodge or block, yet this was the moment he'd been waiting for. Arthur, assured of his victory, had made a critical mistake.

"Maybe for *you*," Koga said.

"What?!"

The blade of Koga's wakizashi launched from its handle. Arthur couldn't believe it—he never imagined the shortsword would have such a feature. Trick swords were more fragile than regular blades, and long battles rendered them useless, hence why it had caught Arthur by surprise. Even more baffling to the Braver was that Koga had waited for the slimmest of openings through which to finish the battle.

Still, Arthur had quick enough reflexes to activate his second tournament skill—a barrier. The Braver was a subclass of Knight, so it came with defensive skills. Arthur's barrier would protect him from the incoming sword.

The shortsword's blade stabbed into the barrier. A thin smile of relief flooded Arthur's face...but it wouldn't last long.

"We're not done yet!" cried Koga. "*Amenomurakumo!*"

Right then, the sword stuck in Arthur's barrier exploded. Koga had charged it with his magical energy beforehand, waiting until this moment to release it. The barrier shattered, forcing Arthur on the backfoot. Koga put everything he had into a follow-up slice with his longsword. Arthur rushed to block, and in a flash

of light, both Seekers found themselves watching as the impact sent their swords flying out of their hands.

Arthur panicked. Knowing that things had turned in his favor, Koga let his momentum carry him forward. Although both were masters of the blade, their thoughts in this instant were entirely different. Even without his sword, Koga still had one of the most powerful martial arts techniques ever known at his disposal.

“Roaring Thunder!”

Koga’s spinning kick slammed into Arthur’s chest. The shock to his heart sent him into cardiac arrest, and Arthur slumped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Arthur is down!” Luna cried excitedly. “The winner is Koga Tsukishima! Unbelievable! He won a sword fight with a kick! Who saw *that* coming?!”

Koga smiled, relieved. “Sorry, Arthur. Ain’t no time for us but now.”

He bowed deeply to his fallen opponent, then walked off to where Hugo was waiting with a satisfied smile. The two said nothing as they high-fived, the slap of their hands serving as their victory cry.

While the Seven Star Cup moved along, so too did the plans of those looking to attack it. The shadow master of the Netherworld Faith, Reisen—also known as Malebolge—was going over final plans with the Rodanian agents plotting the empire’s downfall. They had met in a secret hideout arranged by Malebolge. Their preparations were perfect, and all that was left was to make sure everything went according to schedule.

At least, that was what everyone thought until they heard the screams.

“An attack?! Are they on to us?!”

The Rodanian agents looked to Malebolge for answers, but she wasn’t flustered in the slightest.

“So it would seem,” she said with a thin smile. “How troublesome. We’ve no choice now but to fight back.”

“Fight back?! Do we even have the means to do that here?!”

The agents had fallen into complete panic.

“Nope,” Malebolge replied, shaking her head. “The faithful are already in position, as is the Lord of Flies. All we have here are the top members of the cult, and none of them can fight.”

“What?! Then what are we going to do?!”

“Don’t ask me. You’ll just have to work out some way to fend for yourselves. The best I can do is cheer you on.”

“You bitch!”

Just as an agent went to grab a hold of Malebolge, the door to their room burst open. There in the doorway stood a woman with a head of blood-red hair and a bewitching grin.

“It’s Dolly Gardner...clan master of Goat Dinner...” the agent said shakily.

“Quite the fearsome opponent,” said Malebolge. “Best be careful or you’ll wind up dead.”

The Rodanian agents were infuriated by Malebolge’s calm, but they surrounded Dolly, knowing they had to take her down first.

“Be on guard!” shouted one. “This is a regalia clan master. We attack her together!”

They moved in all at once.

“Piss off.”

Dolly had buffed herself before storming in, and her fists turned her opponents into minced meat and broken bones. Blood and guts splattered across the room. Malebolge wiped some of it from her face with a finger and licked it with a smile.

“They were all A-Rank, yet you finished them in seconds.”

“Were they? I thought they were C-Rank.”

“Funny. You were *supposed* to be more exhausted by now...” Malebolge sighed. That part of her plans had gone awry. “I was never going to fight you,

but I guess there's no escaping it. Show me what you've got, Little Miss Black Goat."

Malebolge dropped into a fighting stance, and Dolly's grin stretched wider.

"I'm not usually one for revenge, but for you I'll make an exception. I am going to make your death dirty. I'll take you apart piece by piece and have you taste true fear!"

The Seven Star Cup had raged on, and now only two matches remained.

"It's time, ladies and gentlemen! The Block B finals have arrived!"

The crowd cheered at Luna's commentary. Zeke Feinstein and Koga were in the ring. In Block B's sixth match, Zeke had wrecked Elliot Kahn. He'd skipped the semifinals because Kaspar of Goat Dinner had pulled out. Koga, meanwhile, had defeated Cave of the Universe's Lei Su to earn his spot in the Block B finals.

Both men had fought twice, but they were in strikingly different conditions. Zeke was cool as a cucumber, whereas Koga was barely even able to stand. Though he had emerged victorious in his battle against Lei Su, he'd accumulated long-lasting damage.

Koga was in the worst shape of his life. He knew the trick he'd used against Arthur would be of no use here. Before him stood an EX-Rank Seeker, one of the strongest people in the empire. His chances of victory were essentially zero.

Nevertheless, he was not about to give up here.

"Next up," Luna announced, "we have Sword Saint Zeke Feinstein versus Futsumitama Koga Tsukishima! How will the man who took down Arthur McBain tackle an EX-Rank opponent?! Let the battle begin!"

At the sound of the bell, Koga dropped his hips low and put a hand to the handle of his sword. It was a quickdraw stance, a sword technique taught in the lands to the east. His Longswordsman skill, *Iai Flash*, required his sword to be sheathed, but he couldn't use it because he'd selected two different skills for the tournament. Instead, he was focused on a pure unsheathing attack—no skills involved. This would give his slice more force *and* make the timing and

angle of his attack harder to read. It was also a message to his opponent that Koga intended to finish this match in a single strike, imbued with everything he had left.

“A duel, Zeke Feinstein!” Koga shouted.

The words were a challenge for the match to be decided in just one move. Koga was betting on the fact that Zeke would not back down in front of a crowd of fifty thousand—he was an EX-Rank Seeker, the vice-master of the empire’s strongest clan, and he considered himself the strongest Seeker ever. Koga *had* to finish this fight quickly. It was the only way he could preserve enough strength to meet Leo in the tournament finals.

“Very well,” said Zeke with his usual smile. “I would not want the match to end with you collapsing from exhaustion, anyway.”

Zeke then lowered his own hips and settled into exactly the same stance as Koga. However, Zeke’s favored weapon was the straight longsword, and unlike the curved swords that Koga used, Zeke received no benefits from fighting in this stance. In fact, he was actually at a handicap—unsheathing his sword would inevitably slow him down.

But Zeke’s body language was a reply to Koga’s own resolve—*with you as weak as you are, I don’t have to take you seriously*. Zeke’s attitude vexed Koga, but he shut the frustration away and focused on his sword. Pride was useless if it did not help him achieve victory.

“And that victory,” muttered Koga. “Will. Be...”

He relaxed his body like melting ice, and at the very moment his upper body began to fall to the floor, the muscles in his whole body sprang to life with perfect timing. He flew toward Zeke at speeds even faster than a bullet. It was called *Shukuchi*—an Eastern technique for moving at godlike speed.

“Mine!”

He closed in on Zeke, charging his sword in its sheath before unleashing it with tremendous force. It was the Futsumitama skill, *Amenomurakumo*. If it hit, even Zeke would fall to its power. Koga’s blade flashed through the air, and just as it was about to sink into Zeke’s neck, he heard the Sword Saint whisper.

“He’s got good people around him. But this one is no match for me.”

If one thought about the flow of time, such an experience was impossible. It was the shortest possible instant in time, and Koga was locked in that eternal moment like a prison. His sword would never reach Zeke. The frozen moment was like a dream, and in it, Koga saw a sudden ending.

His vision filled with a blue flash, and it expanded until it drowned out his consciousness completely.

When Koga opened his eyes, he was in his locker room. He tried to sit up, but his body ignored him. Turning his head, he saw Hugo standing over him with arms crossed. Koga’s gaze pleaded for answers. In his heart he knew the result, but still he had to ask. Hugo paused for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

Tears flooded Koga’s eyes. Even after giving everything he had, he’d lost to Zeke. He had made a promise to Noel that he would emerge victorious. Koga had wanted to *save* Noel, and yet still he had been soundly defeated.

Koga wept and wailed. It was like the defeated, bitter cries of a wild beast. He could not forgive himself for his own weakness. He cried until the last of his energy was gone, and then he passed out again.

“You fought well. I am proud of you from the bottom of my heart.”

Hugo’s words fell upon his unconscious friend. He could not bear to speak them to the Longswordsman’s face, so he spoke them now. When he left the locker room, he picked up the scent of cigarette smoke in the air—an aroma so familiar he knew it immediately.

He chuckled. “Always with the tough-guy act.”

“When I was a child, the boys would catch grasshoppers and pull their legs off. It was fun for them. I thought it was the cruelest thing in the world, and I still do. At the same time, it’s so much more *fun* than I expected. Perhaps I could get used to this.”

Dolly chucked Malebolge’s right arm away with an ice-cold smile. The other being breathed heavily, enduring the pain of having lost a limb.

“Reisen,” Dolly said, “I learned after the last time that you have the ability to nullify skills. But in a fight like this, you’re nothing.”

She still didn’t know Reisen’s real name.

“Sounds like they’ve finished downstairs too.”

Until just a moment ago, screams had pierced the air from underneath them, but they’d suddenly stopped. The pattering of running feet had also fallen away—Goat Dinner had taken care of the Netherworld Faith’s leadership.

“Well then,” Dolly said, “shall we go back to our little game?”

Malebolge should have been terrified, but she cracked a smile. There wasn’t a single bead of sweat on her calm, easy-going face. “What a merciless woman. Such a pity that you were born a human.”

“I’m quite nice, I’ll have you know. I’m just picky about *who* I’m nice to. And you’re not a person, right? You’re a monster,” said Dolly, her tone growing sharp. “The jig is up. I don’t know how you’re able to work in the Abyss, but I’m sure the autopsy will answer that question for us.”

“Ah, so you already knew,” said Malebolge. “In which case, I’m terribly... disappointed.”

“What?”

“If you knew I was a beast, you must have known I’d be willing to stoop as low as *this!*”

Malebolge thrust her remaining left hand into a void and pulled something from it. She threw the object straight at Dolly, but she didn’t have the strength for a fast pitch. Dolly should have been able to avoid it with ease.

And yet, the moment Dolly saw it, she froze. As her movements ground to a halt, her mind worked in fast forward.

It must have been ten years ago. Dolly was fifteen and pregnant with her fiancé’s child. But the day she gave birth, Dolly’s fiancé died in an accident. Dolly did not have the wealth or assistance to raise the child on her own, and though it broke her heart, she entrusted the child to an orphanage so she could

work.

Dolly became a Seeker after that. Fortunately for her, she had a rare and prodigious talent for the job. It was not long before she was accomplishing great things and had become a clan master on the regalia.

However, her talents were also her misfortune. While she had the money and the status to start a family with her own child, she had accumulated such power that she refused to be tied down by motherhood. She left her child alone and instead sent them huge sums of money.

But this was not to say that Dolly was unloving. Her heart was one of guilt and regret. Missing out on the feelings of motherhood sent thorns into her soul. Once, and only once, Dolly had visited the orphanage where her child lived. They looked just like Dolly did when she was young, save for her fiancé's black hair.

That visit had been but a few days ago, when Dolly's tactical error resulted in severe injury to one of her own clan members. It was a moment of weakness, one that rendered Dolly helpless—she needed to see that her child was safe. The sight of the child had warmed Dolly's heart, surprising even the Seeker herself. She wanted to see her child more often, even if it had to be from a distance.

Dolly's memories stopped there. Her body returned to life, and she ran—not to avoid what Malebolge had thrown but to ensure its safety. She caught the object in her arms. It was warm, soft, and it smelled of milk. It was a baby. The child's innocence lit up their face as they smiled.

"You're safe now," Dolly said.

The baby was safe from harm. She didn't know whose baby they were, but she smiled back at them. She remembered what it was like to lose the warmth of a life. That was when she realized the truth.

"Damn it!"

Malebolge's spiteful laugh scuttled coldly down Dolly's spine like ice.

The Netherworld Faith had made people into living bombs. Dolly had realized it far too late. The baby began to glow in her arms, and Dolly accepted her fate, wrapping the infant in her arms instead of throwing it as far as she possibly could.

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for! The Seven Star Cup finals!”

Luna was more excited than ever, and the crowd was right there with her.

“You won’t want to take your eyes off this one, folks! The stage is set! We saw some thrilling upsets throughout the tournament, but EX-Rankers are clearly worlds above! They wiped the floor with their competition to bring us this! A battle between living gods!”

The term “battle between living gods” was nothing if not apt. Leo and Zeke were human, yet they wielded almost divine power. On this day, here in the colosseum, fifty thousand people would bear witness to a clash that could be called mythological.

“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to fight you,” said Zeke with an icy grin. “As a fellow EX-Ranker, I know exactly the kind of boredom you’re going through. It doesn’t matter if you have the power of the gods at your fingertips—the solitude of lacking worthy opponents is soul-crushing. That’s why you wear that mask and live life in the fast lane, no? But now you can be at ease because your boredom ends today. I will help you realize the thrill of defeat.”

While Zeke was talkative, Leo remained entirely silent. He did little more than snicker through his nose, a gesture that did not go unnoticed. Zeke knew then that Leo did not see him as an equal, and his face twisted with rage.

“War God Leo Edin versus Sword Saint Zeke Feinstein! The King Slayer versus the Innocent Blade! Let the battle begin!”

At the very instant the bell rang, Leo threw a punch at unbelievable speed—the exact punch he’d used to defeat his last two opponents. But Zeke dipped out of the way with ease and threw a right-hand counter, which slammed into

Leo's mask. The force of the blow hurled Leo backward, and he slid all the way to the edge of the ring.

"Consider me not using my sword to be an act of mercy," said Zeke. "But you only get one. Don't toy with me, Leo."

As Zeke spoke, a section of Leo's mask crumbled to the ground, revealing a left eye of deep scarlet. His eye narrowed in what must've been a smile, and Zeke felt the madness in it. The man was like a starving lion baring its fangs.

"It really is like a battle straight out of myth," Leon said, pale-faced. He was watching the fight from the locker room.

The fight was a frenzied back-and-forth that felt more like a global calamity, and it seemed like only a matter of time before the barriers equipped around the ring were pushed past their limits.

Leon had seen a fight between EX-Rankers before, when Zeke fought Johann, but this was even fiercer than that. The fight with Johann had sharpened Zeke's swordsmanship even further, and Leo was a stronger hand-to-hand combatant than Johann. But Leon couldn't even actually grasp the battle in its entirety—it was little more than guesswork based on the brief movements he glimpsed.

"Damn it," Leon muttered, frustrated. "I can't catch more than 70 percent of what's going on."

"I thought I was catching up to them," said Alma, her voice trembling, "but they're still so very, very far away..."

Her eyes were wet with tears. Alma was the most skilled of everyone in Wild Tempest, but even she felt despair at the sight of Zeke and Leo in the midst of battle. The throne of the gods was truly the highest of peaks.

But there was one man who could get them there, and he stood by their side.

"Sword Saint skill: *Air Burst*. Zeke's attack covers the whole ring, so Leo takes to the air. Zeke follows. They kick off the air to move, fighting and defending. Leo feints. He goes from a straight punch to a high kick. Zeke bends his body to avoid the strike and counters with an upward swing of his sword. Leo leaps

backward to evade, then falls down to the ring. Zeke rushes in from the sky, but Leo uses War God skill: *God of the Dharma Fist*. A seal in the shape of a lotus expands from his feet. I see three thousand fists being thrown at the same time. Zeke responds with *Air Burst*. The skills cancel each other out. The two Seekers immediately engage in close-quarters combat. Zeke starts with a high-speed combination. At strike number seventeen, he feints with a straight thrust. Leo leans to the side, so Zeke transitions to a horizontal slice. Leo parries it with his fist...”

Noel was murmuring incredibly fast, describing the dizzying flurry of blows. But he wasn’t talking about the battle as it happened—he was predicting it all *beforehand*. Leo and Zeke seemed to bring his words to life as if tracing his precognition.

It was said that to look directly upon the gods was to find yourself blinded, and Noel likewise suffered for his attempts to fully grasp this battle between gods. The blood that leaked from his eyes was akin to divine punishment.

“Noel! Stop this! You’re at your limits!” Leon shouted.

Noel had overloaded his precognition. Processing battle calculations at such high speeds put severe strain on his brain, leading to his bleeding from the eyes. Leon couldn’t bear it and he ran to stop his clan master, but Alma thrust a hand out in front of him.

“No,” she said. “If you stop him now, everything will have been in vain.”

“He’s going to burn his own brain to ash! At least let me heal him!”

“Can’t. He told you himself, didn’t he? Healing works by boosting the target’s own healing abilities. If you do that, you’ll interrupt his thoughts. Usually that wouldn’t be an issue, but with Noel using his precognition...it would be fatal.”

Leon had no retort. His only choice was to wallow in his own powerlessness. He knew this was part of the plan. He *knew* it. But he hated seeing Noel tortured so much more than he had expected.

“I always thought that what Koga said was right.” Alma spoke as if to lessen the grief. “We shouldn’t have made Noel shoulder all this weight...”

Leon’s head drooped. He needed to be stronger. Was it really victory when it

hinged on this? When they had to leave things in the hands of a friend who had such little life left?

“It’s time,” Noel announced at last, wiping the blood from his eyes. He flashed them both a bold grin. “Now we get serious. Leon, get ready for the drop. We do everything according to plan—don’t drop before I do.”

“Urk... Understood.” Unable to refuse, Leon nodded solemnly.

The shock waves from the battle of wild, rampant gods now threatened to destroy the barriers surrounding the ring. None of the fifty thousand spectators knew that, however, so they continued to cheer as the battle raged on. They had no idea what was happening, but it was for this very reason that they sat, entirely entranced—lost in all the awe and excitement. The colosseum was now a shrine to two powerful gods, and their battle only grew fiercer as the fifty thousand faithful looked on.

Zeke sensed his sword growing sharper. It was something he’d felt in the battle against Johann—a huge experience gain that came from going up against a truly strong opponent. Endless power surged through him, a power so great he felt he could slice through the stars above, yet with it came a rising panic—a worry that spread like a drop of ink seeping through white paper.

Where... Where does it end?!

Their battle swung like a pendulum between attack and defense. Zeke was not inferior to Leo, yet Zeke had the impression he was waving his blade around in darkness. Noel’s words passed through his mind:

“I’ve never met Leo in person... But if I were to go by his battle record, I would say he’s stronger than you. As far as brute strength goes, Leo is definitely superior.”

A sudden terror gripped Zeke. Even though it was no more than a flash of white noise, the tiny fragment of impurity was enough to bring a god back down to the world of men.

Zeke spat as Leo pounded him in the guts with the perfect punch. He’d left the tiniest of openings, and Leo capitalized on it. Zeke was on the verge of blacking out completely from the sheer destructive power of the strike. He

thrust his sword into the ground to slow himself and barely managed to escape a ring out. Still, the feedback from the Megalith—the inescapable pain—nearly made him collapse in agony. The pain was so sharp, so excruciating, that if he made even the slightest misstep, he would pass out.

Even then, the Megalith had not reached its limit. The fight was not lost; the battle wasn't over. It was a simple moment of carelessness. Zeke could still turn things around. These reassurances raced through his head, but at the same time, another thought had taken root in his heart.

If this had been a real fight, that strike would have killed me.

Zeke's eyesight wavered. The damage to his body was dissipating, and his breath was steady, but he was filled with doubt down to his soul. Leo read his hesitation and thus waited to follow up on his attack. The Lion Slayer stood in place, staring at him with an ice-cold gaze.

"Ha...ha ha... Ha ha ha..."

Laughter bubbled up inside of Zeke as he finally understood the truth: he was far, far weaker than Leo. He knew then that he couldn't use his full power in this ring.

"Guess I'll just have to apologize to Noel later," he muttered. Then he glanced at his cornerman and barked a single order: "Get out of here and find cover, *now.*"

"Huh? Find cover?"

"I am *not* in the mood. I won't repeat myself."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Zeke's cornerman turned on his heel and disappeared in an instant.

"Glad I picked a cornerman who knows how to follow orders," Zeke said with a chuckle. "I had a feeling it might come to this."

Zeke swung his sword, but the strike was aimed in the complete opposite direction of Leo. A split second later, the Megalith he was linked to collapsed with a crash, severing his connection to it.

"These towers make me weak," he said, pointing his blade back at Leo. "They

give me the safety cushion of a second chance. But there are no second chances in true battle. Real battles are not about winning and losing—they're about life and death!"

Zeke's shout roused his confidence in himself.

"Now we can start the *real* finals, Leo. If it takes everything I have to defeat you, then that's what you'll get!"

The man's fighting spirit was completely renewed, and he settled into a fighting stance. Leo glanced at his own cornerman and sent him away, then destroyed his own Megalith with a kick.

"Fine. If that is what you desire, then you'll get your deathmatch."

Leo settled into his own fighting stance as the crowd screamed from their seats.

"I-Is this it?! Is this a true battle to the death?!" Luna screeched, as thrilled as she was terrified. "Both fighters have made it clear that they're staking their lives on this! B-but this is way beyond the rules of the tournament! Big sis Finocchio, what does the tournament management make of the situation?"

"Officially, we don't permit deathmatches," replied Finocchio, "but who can possibly stop those two?"

The gods had cut the chains that bound them, granting themselves the freedom to run rampant. It seemed nobody could stop them. If management even tried, they would be killed where they stood.

As if to prove Finocchio's fears, the two unchained gods shouted in ferocious harmony, "You're dead!"

Thus they clashed. Zeke used the Sword Saint skill, *World's End*. It was the ultimate sword skill, acquired through his battle with Johann. No god, no demon, no *world* could stop it. The slash sped at almost light speed, heading toward Leo with a blue glow.

"In heaven as it is in hell. Salvation for the vestiges of wandering souls—*The Six Paths*."

Golden light pulsed from Leo's fist, enveloping the blue glow of Zeke's blade.

The golden light represented salvation through destruction, and it returned everything to nothing. On impact, Zeke's physical attack vanished from reality. The clash with *World's End* came at a huge cost to Leo's power, but Zeke was covered in deep wounds from having received it head-on.

Zeke collapsed and, though he was still conscious, he couldn't even move if he'd wanted to. He lay on the brink of life and death as the footsteps marking his defeat approached him. Leo's red eyes flashed at the edges of his hazy vision, as did the horrifying glimmer of insanity that lay in their depths.

"You are dead, weakling."

With that, Leo sent a fist flying down toward Zeke. The barely conscious Zeke was prepared for death, but right then two figures appeared in the sky above.

"X Invincible!"

Leon dropped to the ring, engaging his skill the moment he landed. *X Invincible* created an unbreakable barrier against all attacks—even Leo's.

"Your interruption only means that you die too," Leo growled.

Leon had reflected his attack right back at him, yet Leo didn't even flinch as he turned to punch the interloper. That instant, the unbelievable occurred: Noel leaped out in a surprise attack to defend Leon.

"I've analyzed your entire moveset," said the buffer.

Noel launched into a spinning kick to intercept Leo's punch. Leo's strike was so powerful that Zeke was the only living person in the empire who could take it head-on, but Noel weaved past it by a hair's breadth and closed in on Leo without losing speed.

Zeke watched it all happen right before his eyes, and that was when it clicked. All of this had been part of Noel's plan. The entire Seven Star Cup had been built around this very moment.

"Noel, I know what you intend to do."

These were the exact words spoken by Hugo a month ago, when he deduced the true reason for the Seven Star Cup.

“You said you do not intend to lose, but you do not intend to win either, do you?” he said with a grin. “If I am reading things correctly, then your real aim is to use the battle between Zeke and Leo to your advantage.”

Perhaps because of his excitement at having solved the puzzle, Hugo pushed the bridge of his glasses up before going on.

“I predict that if two EX-Rank Seekers meet in battle, it will cause a disaster. There will be no escaping it. And if you stop that disaster from getting out of hand, you will prove in front of the whole empire that you’re above them both. That is your goal, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“What do you mean, ‘a disaster’?” asked Leon.

“Only Noel knows for certain, but based on what I have heard of Zeke and Leo and their personalities,” said Hugo, putting a finger to his lips, “they are sure to break the rules. They’ll turn their fight into a full-on deathmatch.”

Leon almost bent over backward in shock. “Wait, wait. You’re telling me you plan to stop two EX-Rankers gone wild?! How?!”

“It is possible with your *X Invincible* skill. It is the ultimate defensive skill because it blocks any attack once. That is how we create an opening.”

“But we only get one shot! What happens after we create the opening?”

“Noel uses *Roaring Thunder*.”

Roaring Thunder—a unique kicking technique that hit the target in the chest with such force it gave them a heart attack. Leon crossed his arms at Hugo’s reply, then jumped into another question.

“Can he even hit an EX-Rank opponent with the attack?”

“He can,” Alma chimed in. “If he tried it on both of them, it’d be impossible, but just one? It could work. But the best-case scenario is having one of the two near death and the other exhausted from the battle. If Noel can analyze the battle up until the moment of our surprise attack, then use his precognition, he can dodge whatever attack Zeke or Leo throw at him and land a direct hit.”

“Will *Roaring Thunder* have the same effect on an EX-Ranker?”

“Their bodies are built just like ours. That I can guarantee.”

“Come to think of it, you’re a descendant of Alcor, aren’t you?”

Alcor Judikhali, former leader of the Society of Assassins, was Alma’s EX-Rank grandfather. Alma had learned her skills from him, so she knew the limits of EX-Rank Seekers. As the grandson of Overdeath, I was in the same boat.

“Sudden cardiac arrest occurs when outside pressure causes the heart to spasm, and this pressure doesn’t have to be strong. What’s important is ensuring the shock reaches the heart. As long as you make that happen, it doesn’t matter who your opponent is.”

“I-I see...” said Leon, nodding.

Hugo cleared his throat. “Alma, can I assume you are done with your analysis of *Roaring Thunder*?”

Alma nodded, then leaned down and whispered in my ear, “Hugo’s usually so quiet, but he’s a chatterbox when he gets excited, huh?”

Unfortunately for Alma, she spoke loud enough for Hugo to hear, and dead silence fell between us. A moment later, we went on as if he’d heard nothing.

“Back to the topic at hand... If everything goes according to Noel’s plan, the tournament brackets and individual results are irrelevant. No matter how the brackets are set and who fights whom, either Zeke or Leo will win. At some point or another, the two will *have* to meet in battle.”

“And when those two fly off the handle, which they will, whoever can stop them proves themselves to be even stronger.”

“Exactly. Even without winning the tournament, Noel showing he can handle two EX-Rank Seekers in such a public arena will prove he is worthy of commanding our forces in the battle against the Valiant. “

“What happens if some other Seeker moves in and tries to stop them before we can?”

“Even if a group of A-Rank Seekers were to try to move in, they hardly stand a chance without a strategy. You have seen a fight between EX-Rankers firsthand—even the boldest Seeker is going to think twice before intervening in a battle

of that magnitude.”

“Yeah, diving into a fight like that with no plan is practically suicide.”

“The only person who might intervene is Victor, a fellow EX-Ranker. But given his age, he doesn’t have the power to stop Zeke *or* Leo. And let’s be clear: a fight between living gods is not something you see every day. Most people are going to be more invested in the outcome than they are in stopping the fight from happening, you know?”

Hugo looked over at me for an answer. I grinned.

“Amazing,” I said. “Exactly right.”

With my thoughts racing at high speed—and at my upper limits—I experienced the world as though it were entirely frozen. The particles of light floating around me were the remnants of the barrier that Leon had cast on me. I had evaded Leo’s punch, but the shock wave of it still destroyed the barrier. There was, at present, 0.01 second before my *Roaring Thunder* connected with Leo’s chest. It was not enough time for any ordinary person to react, but maybe it would do for an EX-Rank Seeker. Despite that, Leo didn’t move. There was only one explanation: the battle with Zeke had left him too drained.

Leo had overwhelmed Zeke in the end, but the fight had moved faster than the human eye could follow. Plus, the massive attacks put Leo in a weakened state. He couldn’t avoid my *Roaring Thunder*, nor could he counter it. Despite all this, I caught something in Leo’s eyes: a smile.

Leo had to understand what I was doing; he saw Koga use this very kick against Arthur. But even if he were seeing it for the first time, he had such refined tactical senses that he would know the purpose of my attack.

Nevertheless, there was no fear or panic in Leo’s eyes—there was only joy and bloodlust. *If you do not stop me here*, his eyes said, *I will kill you with my next strike*.

There was only a small chance that *Roaring Thunder* would work on Leo. He was exhausted, sure, but he was still in better condition than I’d expected. At this rate, even a direct hit had barely more than a nil shot at stopping him cold.

My precognition showed me a vision of what would happen if my *Roaring Thunder* failed. In that future, I would end up impaled on Leo's fist. But the future was not set in stone. All the same, there was only 0.01 second before impact. Just as it was no longer possible for Leo to avoid my attack, it was no longer possible for me to stop it.

And so what?

It was an instant that spread into near-infinite directions, and among them a memory of a particular day surfaced in my mind.

"One in ten, I'd say."

Those were Gramps's first words when he came to.

"You did good," he said, rubbing his chest. "I'm EX-Rank, but that *Roaring Thunder* hit me flush. I might not have anything more to teach you."

There was a wide grin on his face, but I was far from satisfied.

"One in ten?! Those odds are useless in a real fight!"

"Don't be an idiot. I may be old, but I'm EX-Rank. This may just be training, but you still hit me. That deserves respect. As the man called Overdeath, I assure you, Noel—your hand-to-hand combat abilities are EX-level."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked with a sigh. "You said you'd make me into the best Seeker ever, didn't you? And I know I've gotten stronger thanks to your training. You taught me about beasts, fighting techniques, tactics, strategy—all sorts of things. I've remembered all of it. But it's made one thing even clearer: I'm a Talker, and making it as a Talker is like facing a mountain of difficulties..."

The Talker's support abilities were incredibly powerful, but there were plenty of other classes that came with buffing skills. In the end, the Talker's lack of abilities and self-defense techniques made it unappealing. How was one of us supposed to reach the top?

"Because of you, I know I can make it to the mid-levels," I continued. "But I've given everything I can to get this far, and it still doesn't feel like it's enough."

“Does it leave you feeling hopeless? Empty?” asked Gramps.

“Yeah, I guess...” I tried to smile and shrug it off with a chuckle.

“Noel,” said Gramps, giving me a serious look. “Why do you think I taught you *Roaring Thunder* even though it doesn’t work against beasts?”

“Huh? Uh...because the Seeker industry is filled with rough types, and you don’t want any of them pushing me around?”

With good martial arts abilities under my belt, I could defend myself in case of any Seeker-on-Seeker violence. Gramps had told me over and over again, “*Before you learn how to fight beasts, learn how to fight humans.*”

“Not just that. *Roaring Thunder* is a support for you—it is your core.”

“How’s that work?”

“You’re right when you say that Talkers aren’t suited to being Seekers. On the other hand, you have now mastered a skill that can take down an EX-Rank opponent. You may not understand or grasp the implications, but it gives you a mental edge. At your core, supporting everything you do, you have something no other Seeker has—and all-new possibilities will sprout from that.”

“Like what?”

“That’s not for me to say. But I have faith you’ll arrive at them in due time. After all,” said Gramps, his expression softening, “you are my grandson.”

My concentration returned to the present moment. The vision of me impaled on Leo’s fist grew stronger, but I did not doubt my victory. I refused to.

Leo, you are indeed the strongest—as strong as the gods themselves. Perhaps even as powerful as Overdeath in his prime. But that’s exactly why I won’t lose. Why I can’t lose. Even if the strongest man in the world stands in my way, defeat is not an option. I inherited everything from my grandfather. If you are the strongest ever, then I will rise even higher.

Because I am Noel Stollen, grandson of Overdeath.

“*Roaring Thunder!*”

My spinning kick collided with Leo's chest, and the sound echoed through the colosseum like a clap of thunder. At the same time, the future in which I died collapsed into reality.

"Wh-what the...?"

Leo's pained, confused voice trickled from his lips. He did not fire off a counterattack and instead collapsed in a heap. The results spoke for themselves. I had made the future—nay, fate itself—kneel before me.

My *Roaring Thunder* had just defeated a god.

The victory reverberated through the venue. Seeing Leo at my feet filled the crowd with shock and confusion. They were completely silent. Everyone was waiting for me to speak. They all wanted to hear the words of the man who had defeated a god.

"Let me be brutally honest," I declared to the crowd. "I did not want to stop these two from fighting. However, they made their decision when they elected to break the rules of the Seven Star Cup, and I had no choice but to intervene. That said, I don't think badly of either of them. It is a pure, beautiful thing when two warriors risk their lives in a battle to decide who is stronger. I am sure that all of you can attest to that after everything you've seen thus far."

Voices of agreement immediately rose up from among the crowd. There were only a few at first, but then the feeling spread, and the silence gave way to praise and cheers for Leo and Zeke. Naturally, the ones who'd kicked it all off had been planted there by yours truly for this very moment.

It was crowd psychology 101. People tended to side with the majority in large groups. All it took was one person to raise their voice, another to agree to it, and then the message would disperse until everyone felt the same. The spectators had been here all day—they were joined together by camaraderie, and it was far too easy to use that connection to my advantage.

"Though the rules demand that both competitors face disqualification, I would like to declare a winner. The champion of the Seven Star Cup: Leo Edin!"

Yes, Leo had won the battle. The crowd went wild, everyone cheering for the first-ever champion of the Seven Star Cup. In response, Leo opened his eyes and

slowly sat up.

“This was what you wanted all along, wasn’t it?” he asked.

Leo had grasped what was going on immediately, which was to be expected. The crowd was chanting his name, but everyone was looking at *me* with honor and respect. While he had won the tournament, Leo was its champion in name only.

“I won’t deny that you’re strong, Leo,” I said. Then I opened my arms wide, gesturing to the audience with a huge grin. “But *I* am stronger.”

He was struck silent for a moment. Then, without warning, he bellowed with laughter.

“Well, there’s no way *I* could have pulled this off!” he said, his red eyes locking on to mine. “When you lost the way you did, I thought something was up. I never imagined you’d have gone to these lengths. You are truly strong, Noel Stollen.”

“Don’t talk down to me,” I snapped. “You’ve lost.”

“I did. And I can admit it. You beat me. So I won’t need this anymore.”

Leo reached a hand up to his mask and threw it away. His muscular face was there for the crowd to see, and with this sudden reveal, they cheered once more.

“Remember this face,” he said, “because I *will* kill you. You are my prey.”

Leo’s smile was one of joy, insanity, and murder as he jumped away from the ring and walked away. As I watched him go, I noticed Leon looking surprised about something.

“What’s up, Leon?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” he said with a chuckle. “It’s just a smaller world than I thought.”

I knew he was hiding something, but I didn’t press him on it.

“Noel, do you think it’s okay to start healing Zeke now?” Leon asked.

I shook my head. “It would be dangerous to heal him in that condition. He’s

already at the limits of his exhaustion. That, and the medical team just got here.”

The medics loaded Zeke on a stretcher and quickly carted him away.

“Let’s go,” I said. “The fight’s over.”

We waved goodbye to the crowd and were met with deafening applause as we hopped out of the ring. The long road to the Seven Star Cup—and the short day in which it bloomed—had come to an end.

Zeke was taken to the infirmary immediately so his wounds could be addressed. His endurance levels were so low that they couldn’t use healing skills on him, so they went with traditional treatment. Thanks to the work of an exceptional doctor, he was stable in no time. After a day of rest, he could be treated with healing skills.

He looked like a mummy with all the bandages covering his body, and he looked up at me from his bed with a critical glare.

“I knew you were cunning and crafty, but I never thought you’d do something *that* cruel...”

His begrudging tone made me laugh. It was just the two of us in the room because he’d sent everyone else away.

“You made your own decision,” I said. “Don’t go pushing the blame off on others now.”

“Nothing I can say when you put it like that...” muttered Zeke, admitting to his own mistake before letting out a long sigh. “First loss ever. Easier to accept than I thought it would be.”

“You deserve an apology. I’m sorry I used you.”

“Forget it. I feel even more pitiful now.” Zeke’s face twisted into an uncomfortable snicker. “Answer me one thing, though. When did you first come up with this grand scheme of yours? You already had the plans written in your head when you came to me about the Seven Star Cup, didn’t you?”

“I did. I had them drawn up a long time before that.”

“How long?”

I paused for a moment, but ultimately decided to tell Zeke the truth. “When I first came to the empire at fourteen.”

“You mean you had this idea before you were even a Seeker?”

I nodded. “I researched the ins and outs of the entire empire—its Seekers, the economy, its politics, culture, population, and the underworld—and this was the plan I came up with. Admittedly, there were a few revisions along the way.”

“You weren’t even a rookie back then and you came up with your plan through *research*?”

“Yep. I figured there wasn’t any other way to get to the top for a buffer like me.”

Zeke turned away. “To get to the top? Get the heck out of here. The moment you came up with that grand scheme, you were *already* at the top. At just fourteen years old, you were the strongest in the empire...”

“There were lots of failures along the way,” I said. “I wasn’t the strongest right from the start.”

“Then how about this?” said Zeke, looking back at me. “You were the most notorious. The most notorious buffer.”

I chuckled at Zeke’s joke. Before I could reply, there was a hurried knock on the door, which flew open a split second later. The members of Wild Tempest spilled into the room.

“Noel! It’s terrorists!” Leon shouted.

“As we suspected,” said Hugo, “they waited for the Seekers to tire out before launching their attacks.”

“But something’s weird,” Alma added.

I looked at her, puzzled. “What? Tell me.”

“It’s not happening here at the colosseum, but in the city.”

“What? But everyone of importance is here. Causing trouble in the city is little more than an attempt at intimidation.”

“Not exactly,” said Koga, his face hardened with concern. “You’ve heard that the terrorists are mostly just ordinary folks. The police could handle that and the human explosives ’cause they had warning, but that’s not all we’re dealin’ with. There’re all kinds of weird buglike creatures and parasitic things with tentacles too.”

“We are dealing with the Lord of Flies as well,” said Hugo.

I still had it out for the Lord of Flies, so it was hard for me to remain calm—I couldn’t hide the rage bubbling up within me.

“The Lord of Flies is making things difficult at the scene. They need reinforcements on the ground immediately.”

“Understood. Let’s get out there,” I said.

Leon then took out a piece of parchment. “I received this from Prince Caius,” he said. “It’s proof that the emperor hereby gives you temporary and total command of the empire’s Seekers. It will be yours until the Valiant is felled.”

I couldn’t hide my glee at seeing the emperor’s own signature on the document. “The prince is wilier than I thought, taking the opportunity to have this put on paper.”

“All the Seekers still here at the colosseum are awaiting your orders. What would you have us do?”

I looked at each member of the clan in turn. “Here’s the plan. The four of you will form units with the other clans. Using *Link*, I’ll keep everyone updated on the situation while we put a stop to these terrorists. Don’t back down—Wild Tempest will have everything under control!”

“Got it!” everyone shouted in unison.

After that, my clanmates ran from the room. Before I could join them, Zeke called out to me.

“Noel,” he said. “I’m looking forward to fighting under your command. But I *will* have my revenge. On you, and on Leo.” His voice resonated with strength.

“Can’t wait,” I replied, turning my back and leaving the room.

Epilogue

THE TRAIN CARRYING HAROLD sped along at an incredible pace. It felt wonderful. Harold was in the first-class seats for this test run, and he had the carriage all to himself. He sat in a lavish velvet chair in the luxuriously decorated car while he sipped expensive wine. He felt like a king.

It was still winter in the empire, and though there was a certain loneliness to the scenery outside, that too was part of its charm. When the train passed by cities and towns, he saw people waving as it went by. He tried to wave back, but the train flashed by them in mere moments.

Four hours had passed since the train left the imperial capital. It stopped on occasion for the loading and unloading of various cargo, but even then it was far faster than using a horse-drawn carriage. The world was still a long way from making flight an everyday means of travel, and trains were sure to start a revolution—although they used the same engines as airships, the fuel cost was much lower, and they could carry vast amounts of people and freight.

“Amazing that they’ve managed to cover so much ground in just two short months,” Harold said to himself.

The train’s abilities were a marvel, of course, but even more amazing was Vulcan Industries and how it had connected the empire’s main cities in such a short period of time. Even taking away the fact that they had received strong support from the nation, the engineers, the class-buffed laborers, and their excellent use of resources were astounding.

Then again, by the time Johann publicly announced the railway project, all the preparations were complete. They were just put on hold when Noel made a point of inserting himself into the situation.

“Nothing if not a handful, that boy,” Harold said. “Making everything harder for everyone...”

The words were perhaps harsh, but the expression on the old man’s face was kindly.

Noel was a storm. He did not mind what trouble he caused for others, and he

was not against wrapping the entire nation in his schemes so long as it meant he came out on top. The scale of it all was what drew people in, and his very existence was now a necessity. Crisis and calamity loomed over the empire, threatening its destruction.

A Valiant was a cataclysm that defied order. Without a hero who could come and wrap the whole thing up like a storm, it could not be defeated. Harold knew this for certain—he had been there for the battle against Cocytus.

“He has so little time remaining too.”

The empire desired a true savior. A messiah. But for Noel, displaying the smarts and abilities that surpassed all others came at great cost. Even now, Harold almost wished his best friend hadn’t put his beloved grandson on the path of the Seeker. It was Harold’s duty to stop Noel, but he didn’t. Instead, he supported the young man. And though it was necessary for the good of the general public, as Brandon’s friend, it was nigh unforgivable.

“When the two of us meet in hell someday, the first thing he’ll do is smack me in the face.”

The sun began to set, spreading a golden light across the lands. Harold let out a sigh as he gazed at the scenery soon to be blanketed in twilight. Right as he lit a cigarette, the door of the carriage opened, and a commanding, black-haired man arrived in a long, white coat. He stood in front of Harold with a daring smile.

“You are Harold Jenkins, correct?”

Harold’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. He did not know this person. The man clearly wasn’t one of the train conductors, but he didn’t look like he worked with the freight either. Even though they were meeting for the first time, Harold also felt something like *déjà vu*.

“My apologies, but you are...?”

“My name is Empireo, Soul of the Samurai.”

“Soul of the Samurai...?”

“This is the first time I’ve ever uttered my name to *your* kind. Perhaps this will

help clarify?”

Harold was on guard as the man held out his right hand, which filled with a light that began to take shape and formed into a gigantic battle-axe.

“Is that—?!”

But Harold could speak no more. Faced with the axe before him, he was momentarily lost for words. There was no doubting the rugged black axe—it was one Harold knew all too well.

“Onikagura?!”

“Indeed it is,” replied Empireo. “A trophy from a very particular battle.”

“No... That means you’re...?”

Empireo’s smiled deepened.

“Draw your gun, Harold Jenkins, for this is where I kill you.”

The terrorists had targeted the capital’s main areas, but there were far fewer injured than we expected. The vast majority of the population had been at the colosseum, watching the Seven Star Cup. Even those who couldn’t purchase tickets had gathered at the stalls just outside of it.

At present, the colosseum was being used as an emergency shelter for the empire’s royalty and its citizens, protected and watched over by the Seekers assigned to the location.

I was in charge of shutting down and suppressing the terrorist threat, and I had various Seeker units either in battle or providing rescue and aid where necessary. I myself was focused on weeding out the location of the Lord of Flies.

Based on the situation, I knew the Lord of Flies was not actually taking part in battle. Instead, they had left the fighting to their familiars—or the living beings to which its familiars were attached. I knew that the more familiars the Lord of Flies controlled, the closer they had to be to the action. The Lord of Flies would have to be right near the action and within range of its familiars.

By gathering reports from each Seeker unit, I worked out the likely location of

the Lord of Flies, then narrowed that down to four buildings. But I didn't need to know any more than that—the feedback stone in my coat pocket had begun to vibrate, leading me the rest of the way.

I arrived at an abandoned hotel, the owner of which had gone bankrupt. I went in alone, without any teammates, and proceeded upstairs. The feedback stone served as my guide. Eventually, I made it to the roof of the building, where the clear winter sky was filled with the golden light of the setting sun. The beautiful, fleeting rays of sunshine cast a shadow at my feet.

I found them. The Lord of Flies is ahead.

The Lord of Flies had their back to me. Fortunately, I was downwind, so they were unlikely to notice me as I held my breath and crept closer. I also didn't sense the presence of any familiars nearby. Based on the mana that the familiars put out, the Lord avoided using them here so as not to be detected. But that was exactly what I'd predicted.

I caught the sweet scent of flowers on the wind. I smothered my presence as I closed in on the Lord of Flies, who was focused on controlling their familiars. Then I unholstered my silver flame and placed the cold steel of the barrel against the back of their head.

“Good evening, Lord of Flies,” I said, my voice like ice. “Or should I say, Bernadetta.”

Bernadetta's back went straight. “Th-that voice... Is that you, Noel?”

She attempted to turn around, but I pressed the gun harder against her head.

“Freeze. Move again and I blow your brains out.”

“Is this some kind of joke?! Why are you doing this?!”

“You're going to try and keep up the act now? Far too late for that. I'm in no mood to argue with you here, so listen up.” I nudged the gun as a reminder and said, “You want to know the truth? I knew something was up the moment we met.”

“What...?”

“As part of the job, I'm sensitive to people's fear. And the moment we met, I

felt terror in you. An unnatural amount.”

“That was because of all the rumors I’d heard about you...”

“There are different types of fear. But the one I felt from you? That was the fear of confronting an enemy. The tension in your expression, your voice, your body—it wasn’t a fear that compelled you to run. Rather, I knew you were already thinking about how to dispose of me. But why would the sheltered daughter of Ralph Golding want to kill an infamous Seeker?”

Bernadetta said nothing. I couldn’t see the expression on her face, but tension emanated from her entire body.

“I have a lot of enemies,” I went on, “but none were princesses out to murder me the moment we first met. So I wondered, perhaps this girl had it in for me for reasons I wasn’t aware of? There was only one possible answer. The Lord of Flies, handyman of the underworld. We had a past, but where they knew my face, I didn’t know theirs.”

Even after putting Loki on the job, I couldn’t work out the identity of the Lord of Flies. But in a strange twist, *not* knowing was the connection that led me to the truth.

“Bernadetta, you are the Lord of Flies.”

“All of this is mere speculation, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be a sore loser,” I said with a chuckle. “I have definitive proof.”

“You do?”

“The pendant I gave you. It has a feedback stone in it.”

Bernadetta gasped, and I snickered.

“Feedback stones are often used in radios. With some magical energy, a divided stone will resonate along with its individual pieces, and radios use that to transmit voices. But even outside of radios, you can use them to know when your target has activated skills. Do you understand what that means? Given what’s going on around us and where we stand right now, there’s only one explanation.”

Now aware of the trap I’d set, Bernadetta sighed. “From the very beginning,

you aimed to corner me.”

“As did you. You simply lost the game of deception.”

“So why did you let it go on for so long?”

“For starters, I didn’t have proof until now. Secondly, even *with* proof, it would be no easy task to charge the daughter of Ralph Golding. Thirdly, I was waiting for an opportunity to have you die in an unforeseen accident. Does that satisfy your curiosity, Princess?”

“Perhaps I’m not one to speak, but you really are wicked.” There was such malice in her words that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Do you know what the other Seekers call me? The snake. No one matches me in deception and cunning.”

Even EX-Rank Seekers and the nation itself were pawns in my game. The Lord of Flies was nothing.

“There is no escaping the truth that you are the Lord of Flies,” I said. “Denying it is pointless. However, before I kill you, I want to ask you some questions. The answers may save your life.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why attack the city and not the colosseum? What good does it do you to rampage through a place with so few people?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bitch. You *do* understand your situation, don’t you?”

“I’m not lying to you. I don’t know anything. You’re right, we should be attacking the colosseum. But there was a change of plans at the last minute. I was told that the circumstances were different and attacking the colosseum was pointless.”

“Told? By whom? The person who hired you?”

Bernadetta nodded.

“Was it a Rodanian agent, then?” I asked.

“No, but they had an alliance with the Rodanians.”

“Someone else is involved? Who?”

“I’ll tell you everything; I don’t intend to keep secrets any longer. Not that you’ll believe me. It’s much more complicated than you think.”

It was hard to tell from Bernadetta’s voice whether she was telling the truth. I could have used *Confess* to force her to do so, but if things were as complicated as she said, it would mean nothing if I didn’t know what questions to ask. My easiest and most efficient option was to have her face me so I could read her expression as I interrogated her.

I took a step back, my gun still aimed at Bernadetta’s head. “Turn around.”

She slowly spun around. A cold wind blew between us.

“I like that look in your eyes,” I said.

They were not the eyes of a sheltered princess who did not know struggle but the sharp, infinitely deep eyes of someone who had settled their resolve.

“I could fall in love with you as you are now,” I told her with a grin. “Now speak. Clearly and concisely as you can.”

Bernadetta nodded, her gaze fixed powerfully on me as she opened her mouth to talk.

“The person who hired me is—”

At that moment, the silver-haired man appeared by my side and whispered in my ear: “They’re here.”

I leaped backward instinctively just as a bolt of black lightning struck the spot where I’d been standing. Moments later, it was followed by a thunderous roar and a shock wave. I kept my silver flame pointed forward as I struggled to stay on my feet.

“Hmph. You dodged it. Precognition, was it?”

A woman’s voice came from within the white smoke of the blast. I’d never heard it before. A gust of wind blew the remaining smoke away, revealing the speaker.

“You...!”

I knew who she was immediately. I'd seen the hybrid beast with her bewitching fox ears in a photo Dolly showed me. She was the broker and puppet master of the Netherworld Faith: Reisen.

Reisen looked at me with a cruel smile and then hurled something in my direction. Before I had a chance to move, it had already hit the ground, rolling slowly at my feet.

"Dolly..." I uttered.

The woman had thrown Dolly's head at me. Her face was frozen in a peaceful expression, and in her empty eyes there was only my reflection. I looked back up at the hybrid beast and aimed my gun at her.

"Dolly told me about you. You're the broker. Reisen, right?"

Reisen wasn't threatened by my gesture. She stood between me and Bernadetta. "At last, I get to meet the snake himself," she said.

"Oh, you've heard of me? That means you know how this is going to end. Woman or otherwise, you won't get mercy from me—I'll kill you."

"I can feel it in your eyes. Quite intimidating. Were the two of you friends?"

"No. The sheer hatred I feel right now is all the reason I need to kill you."

"Hmph. So you hate me. I am so sad," she said, shaking her head. "To be hated by my own child. Is there anything more tragic?"

"Huh? What did you just say?"

Reisen shot me a perplexing smile and put both hands on her ample bosom. "I'm sure it must come as a shock, but it's true. I am the 'mother' of the hero you've become, Noel Stollen."

There was a moment of silence, and then I burst out laughing. "Me? Your son? Has your brain rotted away? I don't remember crawling out from between your hideous legs!"

"I don't remember giving birth to you either. However, I assure you I am the mother of who you've become. You can read people's faces, no? Tell me I'm lying."

She wasn't. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"Now tell me," Reisen continued. "When was the hero Noel Stollen born?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Why, the very reason you sacrificed years of your life to reach the peak of all Seekers—you, largely considered the weakest of all classes. It all started with the death of your beloved grandfather, did it not? On that day, there was a gigantic back current of mana in town, and it caused an Abyss to open. Then a beast emerged...one that slayed your grandfather."

And then I...

"You made a vow to your grandfather in his dying moments. You promised him you would become the strongest Seeker ever. That was where you were born, Noel—without that moment, the Seeker you are now would not exist."

"You..."

"Ah, you're a sharp one. You understand, don't you? I am the one who caused that to happen."

"Reisen!"

Rage blacked out all my thoughts and I remembered—I remembered Gramps. I didn't hesitate. I fired my silver flame in an instant. The Garmr bullet flew from the barrel and slammed right into Reisen's face, sending her arching backward.

But there was no follow-up explosion. Instead, Reisen swung back up to face me. With a grin, she spat the bullet between her teeth onto the ground.

"I still haven't introduced myself," she said. "My name is Malebolge. Malebolge the Chaotic. I control chaos, so I control fate...and I am one of the Valiants."





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